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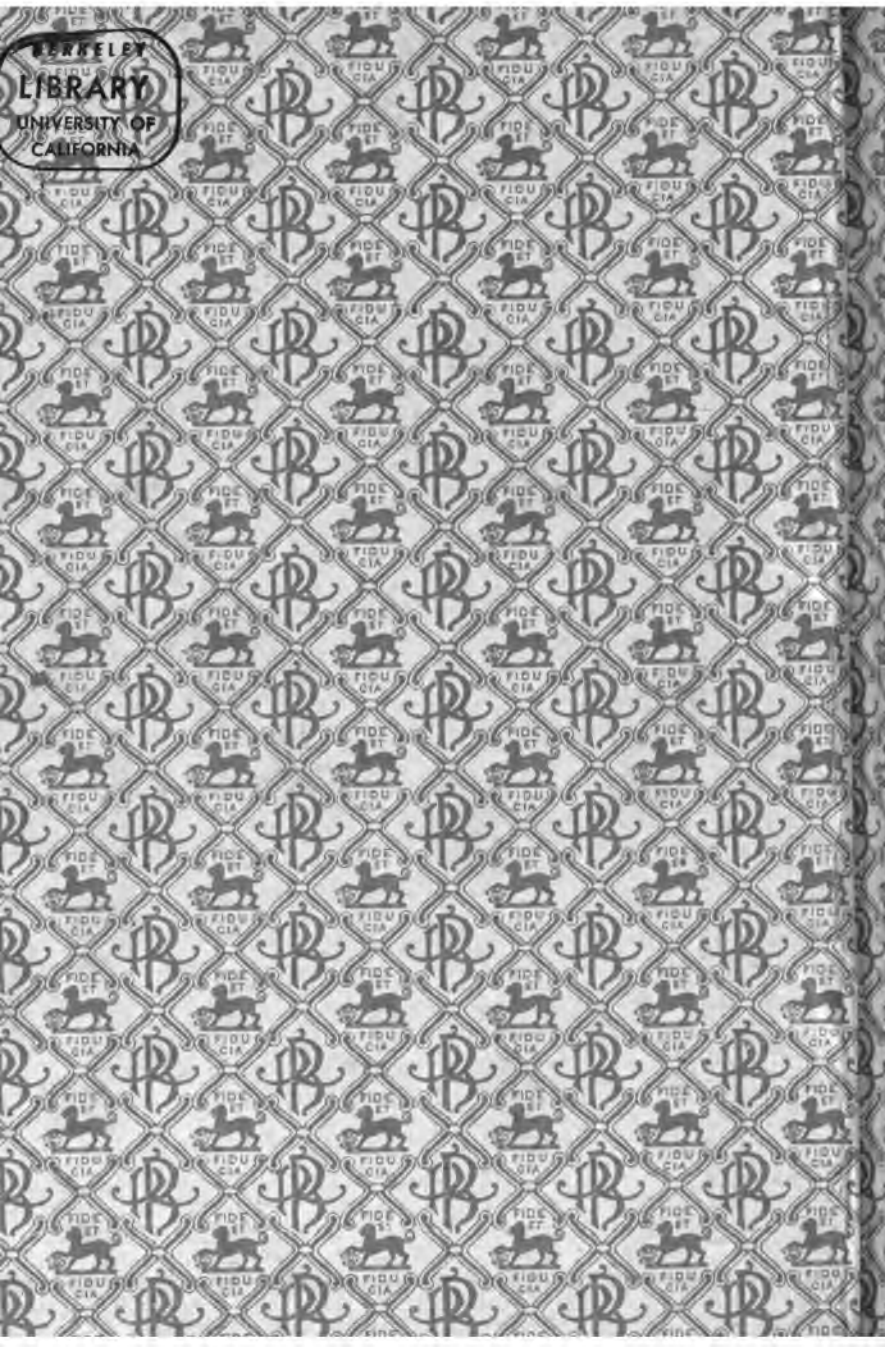
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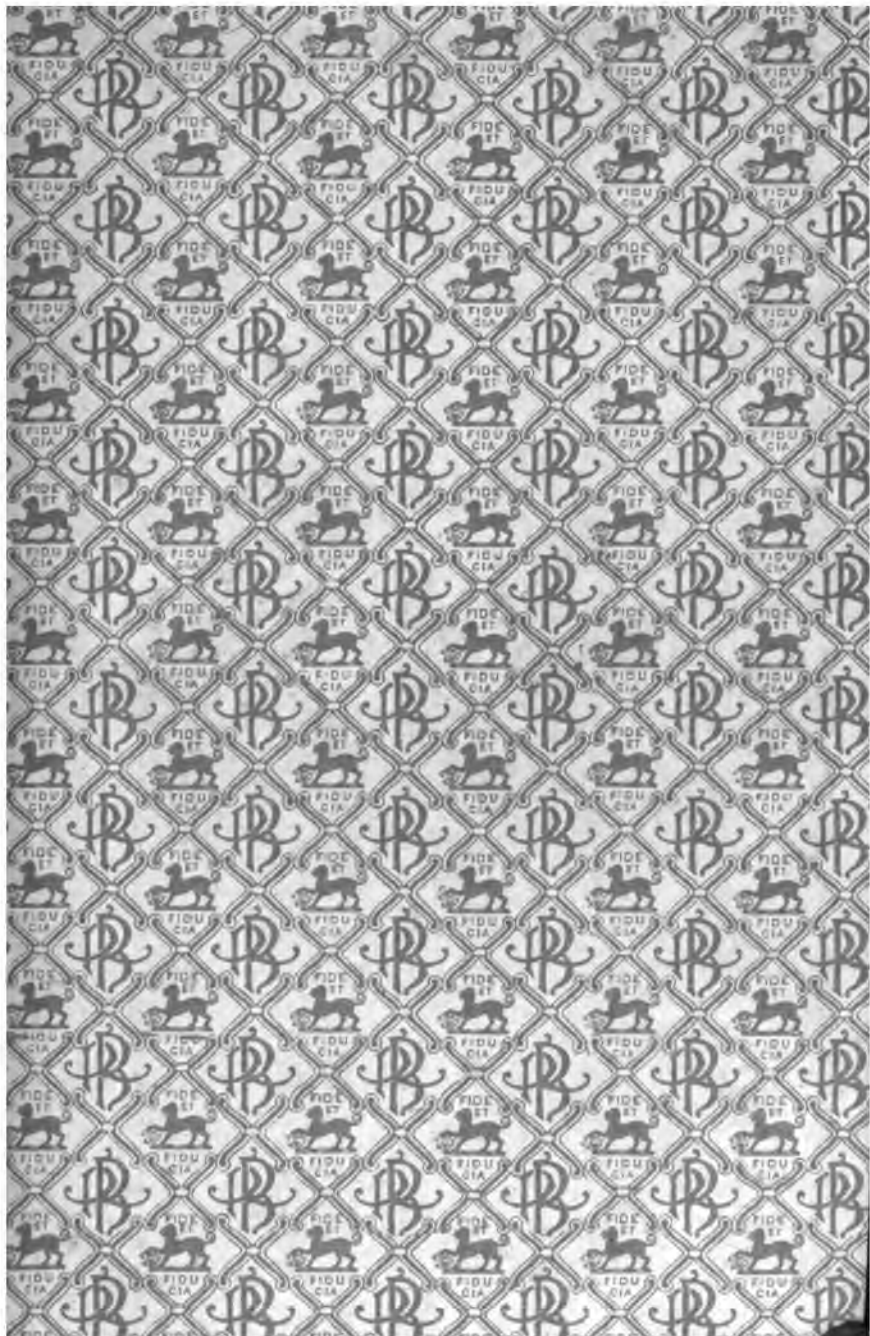
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# BERTHA'S EARL.

"Oft would I think, O Lord, what may this be  
That Love is : of so noble might and kind  
Loving his folk? And such prosperity  
Is it of him, as we in bookès find?  
May he our heartès setten and unbind?  
Hath he upon our hearts such mastery,  
Or is all this but feignèd phantasy?"

*James I. of Scotland.*

# BERTHA'S EARL.

A NOVEL.

BY  
LADY LINDSAY,  
AUTHOR OF "CAROLINE."



*IN THREE VOLUMES.*  
VOL. II.

LONDON:  
RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,  
Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.  
1891.

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## BERTHA'S EARL.

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### CHAPTER I.

DELACHAINE COURT is a vast modern edifice, built by the father of the present earl on the very site where the old castle was burnt down. Of the ancient building no trace remains. Painfully gothic in appearance, the Court lies embosomed in trees upon a gentle slope, whereon its modern battlements, facing south and west, rise with artificial grimness amidst the utter silence of a great English park.

This park—a favoured corner of the earth—is very beautiful. It has been the land or

home of the Tracys for many generations, even before the doughty warrior, Walter Tracy, was knighted in acknowledgment of many faithful services to the crown.

Almost immediately in front of the house is a piece of ornamental water, termed a small lake or a large pond according to the taste and courtesy of the beholder. On the silver surface a couple of swans float tranquilly. From the tree-tops comes the cawing of rooks, with harsh but cheerful sound breaking the stillness. The distant coo of a turtle dove falls softly on the listener's ear, whilst a puff of blue smoke rising from a gardener's cottage seems to be the only sign of neighbouring human life in this ancestral solitude.

Aggie, sitting beside prim Jemima, and rolling onwards through Delachaine park in a neatly-appointed brougham, was deeply interested to make acquaintance with the scenery, although the state of nervous excite-

ment in which she found herself was not conducive to minute observation.

It had been a disappointment, a very great disappointment, to the child when, at the station, she was greeted by no one but a tall footman in livery and with powdered head, (for the earl was a staunch conservative of old-world fashion,) who handed to her a three-cornered, hurried, almost desperate note from Bertha, containing profuse apologies for unexpected absence and delay. There was that very day a function, (so wrote Lady Delachaine to her little sister,) something which she had not in the least known of nor anticipated. The inhabitants of a neighbouring town were to give her a bracelet, or a bread-basket, or something—all these marriage rejoicings were not yet quite over; in fact, there were too many of them. The quietness of the week immediately succeeding the wedding had postponed all such

duties till now—it was too tiresome—of course the one thing she really wanted was to see Aggie—she hoped to be back quite as soon as Aggie herself could arrive—etc., etc.

But the fact remained : Bertha was not at the station.

What a long time it seemed since the sisters had met ! What an interminable while since June, when the last meeting had taken place, (a week after the wedding-day,) and they had held each other's hands only to part again at the end of one brief hour of hurried converse !

To the younger sister it appeared as though she were growing into quite a different person from the little faithful companion of Bertha Millings' joys and troubles. Whilst the Delachaines had been absent abroad—an absence prolonged beyond all expectation and prophecy, during which time the newly-married pair visited many

cities (though not perhaps Carthage)—she herself had paid several lengthy visits; she had been more than once the guest of Mrs. Weagles, and she had also stayed with the duke and duchess at Baynham Towers. These homes were necessarily somewhat different, but the child had been as happy in the one as in the other and, it may be added, as capable of giving pleasure also.

Meanwhile Jemima, who was rapidly developing into an ultra-aristocratic retainer, and in whose bearing sternness, fidelity, and reticence were judiciously mingled, had kept her private opinions regarding the ups and downs of life more than ever philosophically concealed beneath curt and oracular sayings. For, as she might herself have said :

“ He that hears much and speaks not all  
Shall be welcome both in bower and hall.”

The brougham rolled on. The day was one of those lightly-frosty autumn days,

when the presence and sweet scents of late summer are still unaccountably lingering in the air. The atmosphere seems preternaturally bright; the branches and twigs crackle and dance; there are still many leaves on the trees, on the russet oaks especially; the empty fields are full of such luminous lights and moving shadows that the bareness is unnoticeable, whilst laurels, yews, firs, and pines, fill up the foreground with dark green clumps that defy the devastating hand of approaching winter.

It was all strange and new to Aggie. She wondered whether this stately landscape might ever become home-like and familiar; like the woods at Baynham Towers, for instance. She cogitated for the hundredth time concerning a sore subject which she had resolutely determined to ignore: why had the duchess kept her on at the Towers, by means of one excuse and then another,

though Bertha had already been in England for some days past? Had she, Aggie, followed out her own desire, she would have flown to Dover to 'meet the home-comers! Could it have been Lord Delachaine's wish—it was of course not Bertha's—that the bride should be welcomed at the Court without the inconvenient presence of her little sister?

When the south lodge was reached, it seemed to the child that her journey must be nearly over, and she rejoiced, though her heart beat high in nervous expectation which was actually more pain than pleasure. But here was still much ground to be got over. A picturesque piece of upland must be passed—the chase, as it was called, where yellow dying bracken covered the earth, and where the trees, chiefly aged hawthorns and oaks, seemed planted at their own wild will. Down a narrow path came, staidly walking



in scarlet cloak and blue-ribboned hat, a little girl carrying a shiny tin can—one of Lady Theodosia's pet school-children. Presently, the scenery changed—the grassy spaces were flat now, and across a lovely glade ran a troop of frightened deer.

“Oh look, look, *Jemima!*” cried *Aggie* deeply interested. “What sweet pretty things!”

*Jemima* looked, and replied much after her usual fashion :

“We've got to take things, *Miss Aggie* dear, according to what we're placed in—that's the state of life which it's been seen fit for us. I'm not one of those who go for to be discontented nor yet puffed up by what we're called to.”

In which enigmatical remarks *Jemima* was not so much alluding to the innocent animals that now, gracefully posed, stood gazing after the carriage, as obeying the direction of her

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own thoughts, and expressing in some degree her sense of disappointment that her young lady, (as she still called Bertha,) had not seen fit to appear at the station.

Very suddenly, as it seemed to Aggie, the brougham dashed up to the house itself.

The hall door was thrown open, and a polite functionary—the groom of the chambers—attended by two or three satellites, graciously informed the anxious travellers that Lady Delachaine was expected every minute, and had left orders for Miss Julia to be shewn to her ladyship's boudoir, whither he proceeded to lead the way. Meanwhile, an official of inferior dignity invited Jemima to "step this way" towards unseen lower regions, which she did somewhat reluctantly, remaining stationary, her figure drawn up to its full height, until her young charge had entirely passed away from her view.

Aggie was now conscious of being con-

ducted through a large inner hall or public sitting-room, where several crumpled chintz-covered armchairs and many disturbed books and newspapers bore evidence to its late occupants. There was even a faint odour of flannel pervading one corner of the fire-side, an odour which Aggie might have recognized had her mind been free to reflect. But she passed onward swiftly, silently, and, as we do in dreams, with a progression both painful and unreal. She vaguely noticed the high gloomy fireplace, the big red smouldering logs amongst a heap of grey ashes, the flashing of the demi-suits of armour hung upon the stone walls, the crimson velvet curtains held aside for her to pass—a moment later, she found herself in Bertha's own room, and alone.

Was this really Bertha's room? The eager little new-comer gazed around in bewilderment. Could she not find a trace

of Bertha's dear presence anywhere? The walls were newly hung with pale blue satin ; innumerable cups and saucers were crowded in glass cabinets ; flowers, stiffly arranged, filled up those spaces on the tables which were not already littered with silver toys. It seemed to Aggie that multitudinous looking-glasses annoyingly reflected her own sombre figure, as she stood disconsolately in the centre of the apartment. Lifting her eyes, she saw to her surprise that she was under the shade of a tolerably large palm-tree. That seemed to her to be the most incongruous thing of all. Next, her glance rested on a cabinet covered with Japanese knick-knacks ; further on, a huge inkstand and blotting-book surmounted by coronets emphasized the writing table.

The child's eyes wandered away to the deep-set window from whence there was a pretty, but (as she thought) melancholy view

of the closed-in undulating landscape. The sky had become overcast ; all brightness had died out of the air.

Aggie's experience of life was not sufficient for her to glean comfort from the fact that events—both great and small—mostly prove to be in absolute opposition to our expectations. She had often mentally rehearsed the scene of her arrival at Delachaine Court. At first, she had imagined herself, hand in hand with Bertha, or perhaps a step or two in the rear, learning to know and to love one by one the beauties of her sister's future home, and enjoying a sort of blissful echo of that sister's happiness. Of late, however, the vision had changed. It was not to be Aggie's lot to share in any way in Bertha's home-coming. Well, it might be very pleasant to arrive, herself a visitor, in what would be already her dear one's intimate life. Surely Bertha must be waiting as impatiently

as herself! Bertha would meet her, would explain everything, would proudly show off her possessions, having arranged, perhaps, some tiny inexpensive surprise for her little sister, one of those joyous foolish plans of old which had already become tender memories. . . .

As Aggie watched the landscape, whereon, as on her own sunshiny hopes, the heavy twilight was fast falling, tears, bitter and irrepressible, gathered thickly in her eyes. Her firm resolves were fast melting away. Her trembling fingers vainly dashed away the teardrops. Already, though she bit her lip hard, her heaving breath was breaking into actual sobs, and her sore overcharged little heart could bear its burthen no longer. Then suddenly a quick step was heard—a door banged—another opened—a warm satin-dressed familiar figure ran, almost flew into the room.

It all happened in the space of a moment—one keen exquisite moment which turned every atom of Aggie's misery into pure joy. Bertha was kneeling on the floor beside her, Bertha's arms were about her neck, Bertha's lips upon her cheek, Bertha's own tears moistening her hair, as Bertha's dear voice sobbed out:

“Oh Aggie, Aggie! Did you think I was never coming?”





## CHAPTER II.

THE sisters were sitting side by side on the sofa in the dusky light, when Lord Delachaine presently entered. Bertha had been explaining almost too conscientiously that a week had scarcely elapsed since she and her husband had arrived at the Court, that each day had been filled with bewildering receptions, whilst one thing after another had arisen to prevent her from instantly arranging for the coming of her little sister.

“Besides,” she added, “you know, dear, the duchess is so fond of you, I really am quite jealous.”

And Bertha had laughed an odd hesitating laugh.



"You needn't be jealous," Aggie had replied in her downright way.

Then Bertha further explained that there was nobody in the house at present, nobody at all except old Lady Delachaine and Lady Theodosia, but people were coming soon, lots of them, quite a big party, and there were to be rejoicings and things, and a ball, the most splendid ball imaginable! Wouldn't Aggie like this?

But the discreet Aggie had not yet committed herself to any distinct opinion when Lord Delachaine appeared.

He crossed the room with a hospitable dignity which compensated for greater effusiveness of manner.

"My dear young lady," he said, extending his hand, "I am delighted to see you here—really, quite delighted. It is a great pleasure to—to Lady Delachaine and myself."

But Bertha, instead of assisting her lord to

round his sentences, seemed deeply occupied in a sudden effort to straighten Aggie's dress about the shoulders and back.

"I am afraid you must be fatigued," continued the earl; then, turning to his wife:

"Have you ordered tea, my dear?"

"I ordered early special tea," said Bertha; "it will be ready in the hall in five minutes."

"Ah, that is quite right! The days close in wonderfully," continued Lord Delachaine, taking out his watch, and contemplating it reflectively. "It is quite difficult to realize how early it is."

Thereupon he moved away a few steps, and stood for a while with his back to the fireplace, earnestly gazing into space as though he were about to give utterance to some very important statement. But it was not so.

"You'll be glad of your tea, I am sure," he said, as with grave steps he recrossed the

room and departed, closing the door softly after him.

The hall was brilliantly illuminated when the sisters returned thither. Bertha liked light, and, in consequence of her frequently owning to this taste, her husband had taken advantage of the tour abroad to have the lighting of the Court entirely renewed and improved. He himself preferred to all else a shaded reading-lamp or a pair of candles, whilst his mother and sister were loud in their expressions of annoyance at the new *régime*. But Lord Delachaine was prepared for such disapproval, and armed himself with that stately neutrality which served him to good purpose on many occasions.

On this particular afternoon the chilly dusk had been shut out some time sooner than usual. At a convenient distance from the fire stood a large tea-table, whereon a singing urn of massive silver, a teapot, and

other appointments of the five o'clock meal, to say nothing of bread and butter, cake, etc., were awaiting Bertha.

In an armchair by the ingle-nook sat the dowager Lady Delachaine, whilst her daughter, at the opposite side of the fireplace, seemed literally half hidden under her piles of charitable work. These two ladies greeted Aggie with courtesy, whilst Lord Delachaine laid down his newspaper for a few minutes, and a kindly smile of approbation floated over his thin features. To Bertha, who took her appointed seat at once, daily home-duties had already become as habitual and natural as they do to most young brides. But Aggie was dazed. It seemed strange to be in this large splendid house, amongst society which was more distant to her than had been that of the duke and duchess; in her mind arose almost comically the recollection of a certain studio

tea, when she had maliciously maltreated the muffin of that noble earl who now sat at her elbow in his and Bertha's home—he Bertha's husband, Bertha's very own earl.

Aggie was recalled to a sense of duty and deportment by the voice of old Lady Delachaine.

. "You must be tired, my dear. I think you have come a long way—what, from Baynham Towers? And you must find it all so—so—— Thank you, my dear, it's only my handkerchief—pray don't trouble—ah, there goes my tea-spoon! And how did you leave her grace?"

"Quite well, thank you."

"And the duke?"

"Pretty well," answered Aggie thoughtfully. "He was very busy, of course."

"Ah, of course! Still at the same book?"

"Oh yes, the same book," said Aggie with some pride. "Why, he has reckoned up the

pages, and in two years and ten months he hopes to have got through just half!"

"Ah, dear, dear!" sighed Lady Delachaine. "As if there were not translations enough already! I'm sure nobody reads them."

"There are a good many," said the earl, leaning back in his chair, and crossing his legs as though making ready for an argument. "And to my mind Cary's translation has always seemed most superior. Just as I am satisfied with Pope's Homer. What do you say, Bertha?"

"I—I? Pope's Homer?" repeated the young countess waking up from a vague reverie. "I don't think I ever read it."

"But there are many people," continued Lord Delachaine, placidly ignoring his wife's sins of omission, "really many people who consider these works insufficient—absolutely unpoetic and insufficiently representative of

the great originals. I cannot say that I agree, that's all. But I do not profess to be a critic."

No one took up the challenge. Bertha looked, as she felt, despondent. Her little sister was awed, though unconvinced. To her, fresh from the influence of Baynham Towers, the translating of Dante seemed to be one of the main objects in life.

Meanwhile, old Lady Delachaine sighed again, and Lady Theodosia audibly counted up her finished flannel petticoats.

"Four, five; yes, half a cup more, Bertha; six, seven, this is a small one, made out of a remnant—I rather pride myself on that—it will just do for Jane Hallyburton—seven—the tea's quite horrid to-day—stronger than ever—you should tell Harris, Bertha."

"John likes it strong," said Bertha.  
"Don't you, John?"

"The tea? Oh yes, my dear, in moderation. But I am sure yours is always excellent."

"What a pretty stitch!" interposed Aggie, taking up and examining the top petticoat from the great pile.

"Do you think so?" asked Lady Theodosia, momentarily mollified. "Well, that is a little variety on the ordinary herring-bone. Of course you can do the ordinary herring-bone?"

"I—don't—quite know," answered Aggie dubiously. "I used to boggle a good deal at things, but I haven't lately."

"To *boggle*, my dear?"

"I mean to run up curtains, or sleeves, or aprons," said Aggie reddening; adding, as she floundered more and more into a nervous dilemma: "or making something or other for models, you know."

There was a silence. Lady Theodosia



was stitching a large mother-of-pearl button on one of her petticoats which had been found wanting. She stitched with such an aspect of fierce determination to do the deed and not be prevented that Bertha smiled, mentally recalling a tradition to the effect that old maids are doomed in a future state perpetually to sew buttons on the clothing of old bachelors, which buttons are as perpetually to drop off again. A worse labour than the task of Sisyphus, surely, to judge by Lady Theodosia's frowning countenance.

Suddenly that lady looked up.

"You will have to go to bed early," she said, eyeing the new-comer with that piercing severity which she usually bestowed upon the young.

Aggie felt the courage of desperation rising in her.

"Thank you," she said quietly, and then, turning to her sister :

“I do so want to see your studio here ; you will shew it me after tea, won't you, Booffles ? You know we talked of it such a lot.”

Bertha Delachaine was silent ; a crimson flush rose to her forehead.

“Studio !” exclaimed Lady Theodosia, with more meaning in the word than ten quarto volumes of homilies could have conveyed.

“I have a room,” stammered Bertha ; “we will go to it presently.”

“I dare say Julia will like it,” said the earl considerably. “It would make quite—quite an excellent playground, and it would amuse her to help you to unpack your painting things. Wouldn't it, my dear little girl ?” he added.

Aggie's face was now as crimson as her sister's. She was conscious of having said something wrong, yet scarcely knew how she

had fallen into the quagmire, still less how to extricate herself from it. The steely-blue eyes of Lady Theodosia were cruelly fixed upon her. It was positively extraordinary to see the velocity with which that lady had commenced a new petticoat, and had begun dexterously to "baste" a seam. To Aggie's unaccustomed senses, the air seemed filled with innumerable floating atoms of coarse flannel. They pervaded the atmosphere, they danced in the firelight, and clouded even the stern face of an ancestral Tracy who, clad in the very armour which was hung upon the wall immediately underneath his portrait, had attracted the young visitor's attention, even in the midst of her own increasing difficulties.

Yet the studio subject, nay, perhaps a haunting desire for the old life, had taken possession of Aggie, and urged her on to further destruction.

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“When I was in London,” she began, in a sharp voice unlike her own, (for the shyness from which she was suffering was almost unendurable, increased as it was by the shadowy shapes of servants who seemed perpetually passing in galleries above, and looking down at her from gothic arches in every possible and impossible direction,) “when I was in London, Bertha dear, and staying at Mrs. Weagles’, you know, I went into your studio every day, and dusted all your things, and had a fire lighted for the damp sometimes, and everything was all right, except one unlucky day—what do you think happened? I spilt half a bottle of linseed oil over the face of Pharaoh’s daughter. It didn’t matter much, did it? In fact I really think it improved the cheek, which was rather white before, and so did Susan, Mrs. Weagles’ maid, who came in to help me to mop it all up.”

"I think we will go and look at the new room," said Bertha, laughing uneasily, and rising from the tea-table with a mighty rustling of her gown. The other ladies sat on in silence, and Lord Delachaine, as he made way for his wife to pass, smiled curiously in a manner that reminded her oddly and uncomfortably of the early days of their acquaintance.

The future studio was certainly not a promising apartment; needless to say, it boasted no skylight. It was, in fact, a chilly and disused bed-room, with a narrow window looking north, and a musty odour that pervaded everything, even the scanty furniture and the faded curtains and carpet.

The mere journey to this forlorn region depressed Aggie. So many stairs had to be mounted, and descended, and mounted again; long passages must needs be threaded, wherein various doors, left ajar,

revealed servants' rooms, or closets filled with aggressive brooms like a *chevaux-de-frise*, and rows of neatly-japanned water-cans. Of artistic implements in the studio there were none—not even a pretence of them. Bertha looked vaguely round, and drew her satin folds a little closer about her with a slight shiver. To Aggie this room was a very portentous straw which entirely broke her back; she burst into a sudden flood of tears, and, forgetting all her good resolutions, as she clasped her arms round her sister's waist she sobbed out :

“ Oh Booffles, Booffles, are you sure that you are happy? Do you and Lord Delachaine really love each other ? ”

These two questions—the most serious that could possibly be put—were uttered with a childish singleness of purpose which entirely disconcerted Bertha. An older person would surely have exhibited more

tact under the difficult circumstances—for they were already difficult—of the married life of the young countess. But then a wiser person would not have cared so much ; at any rate, no one but Aggie *did* care so much—so thought the elder sister. Bertha turned her head aside ; there was perhaps just one padlocked door in her heart which hid and shut away all her warmest and most impetuous feelings, and this door she never cared to open. Given that it were securely shut, was it not better so ?

“ Well, darling,” she said at last hesitatingly, and with a certain tremulousness of voice ; “ people don’t always shew quite what they feel. That is, when they are grown up,” added Bertha, with a smile which took away all sense of reproach. “ You have been staying with the Baynham ; were they continually repeating how fond they are of each other ? ”

"No, but they looked it," replied Aggie curtly.

"Well, well, let us go back to my sitting-room," said Bertha. "We can't tackle this studio to-night, evidently, and there's a great deal I want to ask and to hear about your own little self."







### CHAPTER III.

IN the course of a few days, the studio really presented a respectable working appearance.

It had been entirely arranged by Aggie's eager hands. A brand-new strip of green baize was drawn across the lower part of the window ; a spotless white canvas stood on a shiny new easel which had been telegraphed for from London, and rows of silvery tubes, fat and unsqueezed, were ranged on an elegant mahogany table. The severest chair in the whole house had been placed in front of the easel, but Bertha, having once sat upon it for five minutes to please her little sister, did not again attempt to use it, either

in comfort or discomfort. She indeed scarcely ever made her way to the room ; her mind seemed paralyzed by the sight of it, just as, whenever Aggie laughingly thrust a paint-brush betwixt her sister's listless fingers, those fingers seemed to refuse the mere holding thereof. Eldon's warnings rose up like censorious ghosts around poor Bertha.

She remembered clearly how one day, not long before her marriage, he had asserted that the difference between men and women artists is a simple one. Men, if true artists, are artists above everything ; women, always women first of all. And she had contradicted him. At another time he had asked, (somewhat impertinently, as she had deemed it then,) whether she intended to go on painting after marriage. "Or will Lord Delachaine prevent you ?"

"Prevent me !" Bertha had exclaimed in contemptuous wrath.

“Well,” Eldon had rejoined—Bertha seemed to hear his calm tones even now—“it will doubtless be according to your love of the art; whether, in fact, that love be great or small. For, as an old English writer says, ‘the poore Fisherman that was warned he should not fish, did yet at his doore make Nets, and the old Vintner of Venice, that was forbidden to sell wine, did notwithstanding hang out an Ivy-bush.’”

How well she remembered his making the quotation! She had looked it out afterwards, and copied it into her book of extracts, though at the time she had only blushed and replied :

“Oh, Mr. Eldon! Is that how you would have me act?”

“No, perhaps not,” he had answered lightly. “The question is whether you are ready to give up your earthly future to one person, for it is only an unreasonable feeling

of that sort which makes matrimony actually happy."

Bertha was not over-fond of evoking these bygone conversations. There was in her, probably, as in all of us, a dual nature. The two Berthas were at strife. One was not industrious enough to work unless obliged; the other not sufficiently content in idleness. Nor, if it were possible to attain the content desirable for her new life, was this melancholy studio a likely spot for such attainment.

Consequently, it was Aggie who wandered disconsolately thither, alone and unoccupied, but glad to be out of reach of the censorious eyes of the two elder ladies of the household, and sometimes equally afraid of intruding in the blue satin boudoir, where her sister seemed so everlastingly busy, writing and sending off perpetual notes of invitation or apology.

The studio became a robe of invisibility to Aggie; it was her only way of getting rid of her own existence, which she came to feel as heavy a burthen on herself as on others. She was unaccustomed to be watched, and Lady Theodosia watched her closely.

"Dearest Booffles, she is like the grand inquisitor of Spain," complained Aggie to her sister one day. "And I am treated like the witches of old days when they went through the ordeal of—water, wasn't it? If I float, I am guilty; if I am innocent, I sink."

"I don't think, dear, that the grand inquisitor——"

"No, Booffles, no; I dare say that was fire. Or the rack. Well, it was something like the rack this very morning. I was running down that ugly long bed-room corridor, singing——"

"Not a nonsense song, Agamemnon? Why can't you warble the dates of the kings

of England, or put a few rules of grammar to music ? ”

“ It wasn’t nonsense,” said Aggie, stoutly.

“ It was just only this :

‘ Il pleut, il pleut, bergère,  
Et ron, ron, ron,  
Petit patapon,  
Il pleut, il pleut, bergère,  
Rentrez vos blancs moutons, ron, ron,  
Rentrez vos blancs moutons.’ ”

“ It sounds positively idyllic,” said Bertha, laughing. “ But not calculated to please some audiences.”

“ Well, Lady Theodosia came suddenly out upon me from one of the doors.”

“ You wouldn’t have her fly in at the window ? ”

“ Do listen, Booffles. She crumpled up her eyebrows, as she does, you know. ‘ Pray, what is the meaning of “ ron, ron ” ? ’ she asked.”

“ And what did you say ? ”

"First I jumped ; she had startled me so. And then I said : 'ron, ron,' helplessly."

"My dear Aggie !"

" 'Don't repeat my words in that irritating manner,' she said. 'Where did you learn that foolish song ? And who or what is "patapon," I should like to know !' 'Perhaps it's like nonny, or derry down, Lady Theodosia,' said I. 'Oh, it is, is it ?' she went on, in what I call her grand inquisitor way. 'And is there a great patapon, or a little derry down, pray ?' By this time I felt so silly I could only giggle, and do just what she hates most : that is, repeat her words. 'A little derry down ?' I said, and laughed. I wanted to cry. Do you remember, Booffles, when I cried for a whole evening because Dr. Jackson asked me how long the seven years' war lasted, and I couldn't tell him ?"

To such recitals as these Bertha at first

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lent a compassionate ear, but, as time passed, she wearied, and strove to escape from them. They annoyed her with the intense annoyance which those disagreeables of life that are small, diurnal, and that yet cannot possibly be removed, are apt to cause to even persons of well-regulated mind. And Bertha was not only not well-regulated—she was distinctly indolent. She wanted to be a mere lotus-eater in this new queendom of hers, and behold! the surrounding country was not of a type likely to promote delectable lotus-eating.

Moreover, and though Bertha loved her sister deeply—as deeply as ever—there were many small pangs which Aggie's sensitive mind suffered, which she would not for worlds have explained to Bertha, and of which Bertha was never cognizant. There is a short mental sight as well as a physical one, and mentally young Lady Delachaine



was an exceedingly short-sighted person. It was perhaps for her own happiness that she was thus short-sighted ; besides, it could only be right that she should devote the greater part of her time and attention to Lord Delachaine and his interests. Her new duties, such as visiting, driving, furnishing, arranging the house, writing notes, etc., developed each day, nay, almost every hour. She folded Aggie warmly in her arms whenever she chanced to meet that little person ; but, as weeks passed, these meetings came about less frequently, and Bertha seemed to be more and more often in a hurry, and more and more a slave to her new life.

“The child should go to school,” said Lady Theodosia.

Lady Theodosia had made this observation several times to her mother when the two were sitting alone ; and she repeated it (with greater emphasis) to Bertha, on what

might be considered a favourable opportunity. Then Bertha fired up, and requested her sister-in-law with some petulance to allow her to manage her own affairs, Aggie being above all things on the earth and out of it her own and most especial affair.

Lady Theodosia shrugged her shoulders, but reiterated her remark next day in presence of Lord Delachaine. The latter, who was evidently suffering from slight chronic deafness, seemed to recollect some pressing business, and walked swiftly to the door, which he closed softly behind him.

He was sitting peaceably in his own sitting-room when, a few minutes later, Bertha burst in. She had never learned to open or shut doors gently.

The earl looked up with a resigned countenance; as a matter of fact, he was doing accounts. Whenever he had a few moments of leisure, he always did accounts.

He was the possessor of various ruled books and ledgers, some locked, some without locks, in which he wrote in his neat precise hand, and which were a source of much calm gratification to him. As he looked up, he could not help seeing the flush on Bertha's excited face, but he only said :

“ Do you know, dear, there is a matter of fifty pounds that won't come right ? I went over this page seven or eight times before luncheon ; I think it must be Atkins's fence.”

“ Yes, yes ! ” muttered Bertha impatiently.

“ Atkins's fence was never thoroughly sifted,” said the earl.

But the sifting of fences, however advisable, did not interest Bertha at this present juncture ; at all times indeed she hated accounts, and investigations of expense.

“ I want to speak to you, John,” she said irritably, as she hurriedly paced the room.

"Sit down, my dear," said the earl, pointing to the leather chair which was the fellow of his own, and which in Bertha's fancy was always occupied by a spectral bailiff or agent of some sort. She was too agitated to sit down, however; she came and stood close to her husband, and laid her trembling impetuous fingers on his arm.

"There is one thing I cannot endure," she said violently. "I cannot have Aggie interfered with."

The earl leaned back in his chair in silence.

"Theodosia may attend to her flannel petticoats," said Bertha roughly; "but it is my affair and only mine what becomes of Aggie, whether in this house or any other."

The earl gently raised his hand, and stroked his wife's hair.

"This house is your house, Bertha; remember that," he said gravely.

Bertha took the protecting hand and kissed

it; a revulsion of feeling made it impossible for her to speak. Yet, after a moment, she began once more, though in a different tone.

"You see, John — you do see, don't you?"

"Yes, I see," said the earl sadly. "I don't suppose that discordant elements can mix, and in my moderately long life I have seldom found any one improve or change much for the sake of others. It is a melancholy axiom, but none the less true, I fear. Perhaps you and Theodosia are equally hard on each other, Bertha."

"I am not hard!" cried Bertha.

"Well, well, possibly not. Anyhow, in this matter of Julia's education, yours is of course the only opinion to be considered. What do you want to do with her?"

"Do with her?"

"Yes; she is still quite a child. Her

education is by no means completed. What does she know ? ”

Hereupon, Bertha found herself truly at a loss. Months ago, her sister-in-law had propounded the same problem, but, mercifully, in this present dilemma, Bertha did not recall that former vexation.

What did Aggie know ? Many things a little, yet nothing to boast of. Was it Bertha's fault ? and had she neglected her little sister's education ? It was so long, in truth, since she had given a thought to such education.

“ I don't suppose,” she stammered, “ I don't suppose that Aggie really does know things like other girls.”

“ That's just the difficulty,” said the earl.

“ But it would kill me to part with her,” said Bertha with a return of defiance.

“ Well, why don't you have a governess for her here ? There is plenty of room in

the house ; she could practise the piano and all sort of things," added Lord Delachaine with pleasant conviction, "and we should never hear."

There was a pause. A governess ! Bertha was so taken aback by this suggestion that she could find no reply.

"Think about it, dear," said the earl, using a favourite phrase of his, as he rose from his chair, and carefully replaced his ledger in a drawer which he immediately locked.

Then he crossed the room to a table whereon were placed a couple of hats, together with his gloves, walking-stick, and umbrella.

The earl liked these articles to be kept in his own apartment and under his own supervision. Indeed, his room presented no appearance of elegance or luxury, scarce of comfort beyond the two armchairs afore-

mentioned. The only object therein not strictly useful was a large picture, painted by a local and undistinguished artist, and which represented his lordship's father in pink, riding his favourite steed, and leading a pack of hounds and a few sportsmen of far inferior size to himself across a rural country interspersed with many hedges.

The earl took up one of his hats. They had both been neatly covered (to protect their linings from dust) with little squares of brown holland marked with his cypher and coronet. He was very particular about these things. So particular was he that he folded up the brown holland square before putting on his gloves, as he said :

"I am going out ; I shall have to walk over to Atkins's and enquire after the fence. I am sure too much was charged for the wood at the time, but perhaps I could find that out at the saw-mill. I should think over



the governess if I were you, Bertha," and with these last words Lord Delachaine left the room.

He stood outside the door for an instant undecided—then returned :

"By-the-bye, Bertha, there was just one thing I wanted to say"—it was the earl's turn to hesitate—"I—I really should give up calling that child Aggie, if I were you."

Bertha looked at him in silent wonder. Had he forgotten his old admiration of the quaint and fascinating name of Agamemnon ? Did men indeed so change when they became husbands ?

"I thought you liked it, John," she said sorrowfully ; "it suits Aggie so well."

The earl smiled his old smile ; his short-lived hesitation had departed.

"I don't know about the suiting," he said ; "it seems to me a queer name for a young

girl. It wants such a lot of explanation, and the explanation's rather lame, after all. Julia is really very pretty ; one of my aunts was christened Julia."

" Oh ! " said Bertha.





## CHAPTER IV.

THEY were all of them standing in the hall, which was brilliantly lighted as usual; the tea-table set ready, as on the day of Aggie's arrival, though furnished with many more cups and saucers. The advent of a large party of guests was imminent.

Meanwhile, the home circle was pleasantly expectant. Bertha—a charming bundle of velvets and furs, her golden hair crowned by a hat of brightly-hued feathers, her wrists glittering and tinkling with innumerable bangles, and her cheeks carnation red—had just returned from driving her mother-in-law in the dainty carriage, drawn by silver-bell'd ponies, which enabled the lady of the Court

to achieve the double duty of taking the air and gracefully attending to the wants of a few poor and respectable tenants. She was now wandering round the hall, criticizing and commenting on such floral arrangements as the head-gardener had laboriously built up in various directions.

The dowager, limp and tired, was warming her feet, which were more conveniently than elegantly clad in the square-toed black merino boots she affected. Lord Delachaine, close by, and standing according to custom on the hearth-rug, wore a certain pleased air, as though he had given himself up to the agreeable anticipation of a well-planned social period, during which he was to do his duty as cheerfully and thoroughly as he expected his guests to execute theirs.

Aggie who, till lately, had been curled up on a far-off sofa, reading a book of fairy-tales, was silently wondering whether, under shelter

of a large Venetian cabinet, it would be possible to finish the story wherein she was so deeply interested. Meanwhile Lady Theodosia, for this occasion only, had as a great favour folded up and patted down her flannel petticoats into an enormous basket. She seemed, however, inert and aimless, deprived of her usual needle and thread.

Presently, Bertha came running up to Lord Delachaine.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you!" she exclaimed. "I am so very, very, very sorry! Mr. Eldon can't come either this week or next, or any time at all!"

"What, not any time at all?" asked Lord Delachaine, raising his eyebrows.

"Here is the letter," continued Bertha, drawing a crumpled page from the velvet and silver pouch that hung at her side.

"Read it me," said Lord Delachaine.

Bertha glanced round a little nervously at the two elder ladies ; she was not altogether willing to communicate her dear Mr. Eldon's sentiments to what she considered "the public." However, she could not easily refuse, so she murmured forth as follows :

"DEAR LADY DELACHAINE,

"Every day and every day have I postponed writing to you. I at first thought of telegraphing that 'life is short and art is long,' but it occurred to me that even the value of this information would be no adequate return to you and Lord Delachaine for your kindly invitation.

"I am overworked and, more than that, I don't want to leave my work. Does this sound like black ingratitude? No ; I am not so bad as I seem. At any rate grant me forgiveness, and pray ask your husband to admit me to at least the outer courts of his

friendship, for you have long allowed me to sign myself

“Your affectionate old friend,

“HENRY ELDON.”

Bertha had scarcely gabbled to the end of this letter when there arose a hum of mingled sounds—that indescribable noise which indicates the arrival of many people. No bell was rung, for the servants already stood in the entrance-hall, but carriages drew up, horses' hoofs resounded under the portico, voices of every pitch were heard—some near, some far—and hasty footsteps echoed on all sides.

Lord Delachaine, without further comment on the letter than a gracious nod to the reader of it, went quickly forth to meet his guests. Bertha accompanied him with alacrity, whilst Aggie, who did not like to press forward, followed at a respectful

distance, smiling to herself as she distinguished amidst the strangers' voices an altercation which gave her a sense of happy familiarity :

" My dear Cas ! "

" My dear Mary ! "

" My *dear* Cas ! "

" My dearest Mary, I do assure you—— "

" Cas, there are two points upon which I am perfectly firm."

" What, only two ? You are too good."

" Well, two just now."

" Ah ! "

" Take off that disgraceful old cloak before you go into the drawing-room."

" I think we go into the hall ; we used—— "

" Well, before you see my aunt, I mean ; and my bag—I insist on keeping my bag ! "

" Insist, Mary, is not a word—— "

" Bertha, don't you insist with John ? "



"I am sure she doesn't. Patience is the strongest weapon."

"Yes, yes, I know :

'Patience is a virtue, possess it if you can,  
Seldom in a woman found, never in a man.'

Why, here's Julia ! Do get out of the way, Cas, and let me kiss the child."

Aggie was more than pleased to find herself again in companionship with those two dear friends who were also her special objects of admiration. At the earliest opportunity she drew the duchess to a seat and sat down, half hidden behind her friend's chair, perfectly happy, content to listen silently whilst all the others talked, though catching only disconnected sentences amid the loud general buzz of conversation that came from the circle around the tea-table.

How well the duke looked ! thought Aggie, contrasting him favourably with the rest. Indeed, although the Duke of Baynham was

by no means what is termed a handsome man, the child was not alone in her affectionate opinion of him. But for his furrowed brow and tired eyes he was quite a young man still. Moreover, his was one of those faces, fine without strict beauty of outline, wherein the soul seems to have wrestled with outward circumstances so strongly as to have left its trace on every lineament. It was impossible to see the duke without being struck by the expression of his countenance ; nay, further, it was impossible not to realize that from him emanated, giving out grace and goodness generously around it, a spirit such as we seldom meet with on this earth. Verily, we sometimes entertain angels un-awares.

“I brought down the early edition of the *Pall Mall*,” one guest was saying. “Would you care to see it, Lady Delachaine ?”

“Oh, thank you. Is there any news ?”

"I think not ; there never is, you know."

"What a line, what an admirable line!"  
quoth another visitor. "I don't think anything holds a candle to the Great Western. Other lines may race and squabble, but give me this."

"Ye-es," drawled a third; "like a thingummy over the tops of the thingumbobs."

"So successful, too, I'm told. Are you a shareholder?"

"Not a bit tired, I assure you. Thanks, thanks. Just *half* a cup. No, I never take sugar. It's only the old fogies who like sugar nowadays."

"Have you brought us any new riddles, Mr. Bond?"

"Oh dear yes; piles of them. My port-manteau's positively bursting. Now, Mrs. St. Oswald, can you tell me: where was the first match made?"

"In the garden of Eden, of course."

"Are you sure?"

"Well, I think so."

"You may be certain; for we know that a Lucifer was seen there. By-the-bye, they say the government will have to go out."

"Is this a conundrum?"

"To some people, yes."

Thus the funny man. There is always a more or less funny man in every country-house party. Sometimes he would not be a funny man at all if there were but a funnier present. This particular buffoon was only moderately funny; yet people often went into fits of laughter merely to see him rub his hands and shiver, which he was wont to do like Shakespeare's "poor Tom," even when not "a-cold."

"How about Tasso, duke?" enquired Mr. Bond with affectionate patronage.

But his grace was never huffy, and more-

over was himself sometimes mildly disposed to joke.

"Tasso?" he repeated with affability. "Are you interested in him? Well, we must hope that he has by this time found his Leonora."

"His Leonora? Ah, very quaint, very quaint indeed."

"I say, my dear fellow," interposed an extremely boyish-looking guest, in an awed whisper, "you're making a hash of it, you really are—it's the other chap, you know. I'm sure it is—I am indeed."

"Dear, dear!" quoth the funny man, in no whit abashed. "You are a walking encyclopedia, Foxy."

"I don't mean Faust and Marguerite," continued Foxy gaining confidence. (He had possibly earned his nick-name because he was so exceedingly simple and straightforward; possibly because his hair and eyes

were black as the raven's wing !) " I've got it—Dante ! That's the name ! "

" Why, you missed my little joke—made on the spur of the moment, just to take you in ! " said the funny man. Then, triumphantly turning to the duke, " my little trap—— " he continued. " I thought you'd all fall into it ! Ha, ha, ha ! "

The entrapped duke laughed outright. What matter that it was the person, not the speech, that so tickled his fancy ? To conceal his merriment, he took a step forward, and picked up one of her properties for old Lady Delachaine.

" How the trees have grown in the park ! " he said, with a benevolent desire to help conversation.

" Haven't they, duke ? " answered the old lady. " Why, in my time, some of them were scarcely up to my elbow, that are now—— Ah well ! Time flies. You don't feel it yet,

my dear boy, but by-and-bye there will come a day—it is like the game I used to play as a baby on my father's knee—our first years go trot, trot, then we amble along, presently canter, canter; but the end of life seems a gallop.”

“Yes,” answered her companion thoughtfully, “a moment of time, a week, half a century—it is all just the same when past. That which they contain makes the years precious or worthless.”

The funny man drew a few inches nearer. He almost winked at the dowager.

“Some of us lead very fast lives, my dear madam,” he said.

This time the duke turned away in disgust, and walked rapidly across the hall to where his wife sat, encircling Aggie's waist with her arm.

“Tell me how you have been getting on, Miss Julia?” he began affectionately. “How

is Mrs. Weagles, pray, and how are Susan, the cat, the infant Samuel, and Pharaoh's daughter? You see I have forgotten no one."

"You never do forget anybody or anything," said Aggie, fixing upon her friend an intensely loving look. "I can't think how you manage."

"You dear little partisan!" exclaimed the duchess laughing, and pressing the child yet closer. "Why, if you take Cas's part like that, what shall I do when he and I have our next squabble?"







## CHAPTER V.

THE guests had all gone up to their rooms. They had all come down again dressed for dinner—the gentlemen in broadcloth and fine linen, the ladies in silks, satins, or velvets, decked with flowers and diamonds. Dinner was at last over, the *chef* having put forth his utmost efforts to serve up in endless variety “a dainty dish to set before a king.” The butler had warmed the claret, iced the champagne, and conducted the meal through its many and difficult phases. The guests, obeying their divers temperaments, having been as greedy as is compatible with good manners, or as abstemious as is allowable with politeness, were now divided according

to English fashion. Whilst Lord Delachaine offered his friends cigars and cigarettes much against his own desire, (for he was but a moderate smoker himself, and by no means approved of indoor smoking as regards others,) Bertha marshalled the ladies to the stately drawing-room.

That Lady Theodosia, during her sister-in-law's first party should view the proceedings with some austerity, is scarcely to be wondered at. Both the dowager and her daughter held aloof, giving up ancient claims with aggressive and ostentatious politeness.

Bertha had taken very kindly to her new duties. Although most of the ladies present were strangers to her, she felt herself curiously at ease with them, and pleasantly elated rather than oppressed by the novelty of her surroundings. Moreover, the duchess was very cheering.

"It is really no trifle," her voluble grace

was saying aside to Bertha, "to receive such a large party, and make them all get along nicely, without any muddles. I assure you when I expect people at the Towers I always feel inclined to go to bed, and hide my head under the pillows, in the feeble hope that nobody will be able to find me out. It is such a dreadful thing to have to go downstairs, and meet every one, and smile and say: *so* glad to see you, *so* kind of you to come. Or to listen with deprecating surprise to the answer: *so* kind of you to ask me! But you're doing it all so admirably, Bertha, and you look—really I ought to be quite proud of you, especially in that gown! I am sure it was made by Auguste. No, wasn't it? Really, white suits you admirably. You can hold your own against the whole county."

"'Fine feathers make fine birds,'" said Bertha laughing.

“So they do, but Delachaine Court was sadly in need of a few new plumes. Of course Aunt Mary is a dear, and no one could be kinder, but ditchwater was flippancy itself compared to her entertainments. And as for Dosia, I never could live up to her friends somehow. Now *you* are——”

“At a comfortably low level, I suppose,” said Bertha laughing again; “well, I am very glad of your level, and your help, Mary, anyhow.”

“You ought to be immensely flattered,” returned the duchess seriously; “not because of anything to do with poor me, but because Cas actually condescended to come. I never *can* induce him to go anywhere, not even for one night, and this time he scarcely demurred at all. He certainly took three days to pack a gigantic box of papers—his work, as he calls it. I am perfectly convinced he will never unlock the box whilst we are here, but

that don't matter as long as he's got it with him. He was quite ready to start, too ; he was only a little depressed when we met all the other people at the station."

"Depressed ? Oh, I am so sorry !"

"You needn't be. It's his way. Besides, you've done him a kindness which I am sure you never meditated. You have given him a dressing-room where the windows and doors are situated just the same as in his own den at home, and before dinner he actually began to pace up and down and wear a path in the carpet."

"He is very welcome," said Bertha ; "I am sure John would gladly provide him with a new carpet for every visit he consents to pay us."

When the gentlemen came out of the dining-room, there was still an hour to be killed before the ladies could possibly retire. Conversation flagged ; what was to be done ?

Nobody was inclined for music ; in fact there was no very musical person present. The funny man proposed, "hunt the slipper," but this suggestion was received in chilly and disdainful silence. It was difficult to determine which of the "*petits jeux de société*" would not involve tiresome dressing in costume or going to stand out in draughty corridors, or scattering the party overmuch, or, (as Lord Delachaine somewhat anxiously remarked,) keeping the ladies up too late ! A round game was doubtless the best ; but which ?

A clever man was present—he was known as such—a Mr. Cheshire. He even looked clever, which is not always obligatory. He was tall, thin-haired, and round-backed ; he was still quite young, yet with no appearance of youth, and he wore spectacles. He seldom spoke, and generally shook his head sadly when addressed. The only thing that warmed

him into conversation was when some beautiful woman evinced sufficient interest in his literary exploits or his special theories to ask him a few leading questions. On one occasion, as ill-natured folks averred, he had been known to keep up a monologue as lengthy and as fatiguing to the listener as that of the ancient mariner.

At the present juncture the clever man shook his head. It was Mrs. St. Oswald, a lady who had great experience in Christmas and other parties, who came to the rescue.

"There is a new game, Lady Delachaine," she said chirpily; "perhaps you would like to try. It consists in everybody's writing down the most foolish thing they can think of."

This proposal certainly sounded attractive, and met with universal approval. At the mere idea of the game the whole party began to laugh. Even Lady Theodosia joined the

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large circle of players. Only the dowager Lady Delachaine, who was rather startled at the frivolous turn things had taken, and her son, who was likewise unaccustomed to such levities, and who remained standing on the hearthrug talking to the duke—these three were the solitary outsiders.

The duke, indeed, was heartily glad to be left out. Writing, both mechanical and intellectual, the conjuring up of ideas and the reproduction of them on paper—writing in every sense was truly meat and drink to him, but for that very reason, and perhaps still more because of the habitual solitude of his life, he gazed with much amaze at the now silent circle of ladies and gentlemen who, each armed with a piece of paper and a pencil, seemed plunged in the most abstruse speculations.

It had been a matter of trepidation to the duke that he might, against his will, be



drawn into that Maelstrom of cogitation, and it was with eager thankfulness that he continued his conversation on agriculture with Lord Delachaine. He was himself no authority on business questions, but he felt that it was incumbent on every landed proprietor to interest himself in them, so far at least as such interest did not absorb overmuch valuable time. Nor was it very difficult to him to converse on these topics with Lord Delachaine, for the latter held thoroughly cut and dry notions of his own, and was fond of an intelligent listener, though easily rubbed up by any argumentative enquirer.

In course of time everybody had finished his or her paper. So far Mrs. St. Oswald's game had proved thoroughly successful. Lord Delachaine threw an occasional benignant glance in her direction. There wanted still five minutes to the ladies' bedtime, (though the dowager had anticipated

it by gently nodding over her newspaper,) and (so thought the host) the gentlemen need not expect to be unreasonably kept away from the billiard-room.

Mrs. St. Oswald meanwhile, with unpardonable bitterness, had written that the most foolish thing she knew of was this present game. The funny man, whose name was Algernon Bond, had noted down nothing but his own signature—the Christian name represented by its first letter only. And perhaps, as the clever man said in a stage aside, this was the truest remark Mr. Bond had made for many a long day. Meanwhile, the funny man was enabled by his amiable humility to enter upon a whole series of jokes on the matter of signing—a bond.

There were various degrees of amusement or the reverse to be found in the different statements made by the rest of the company. Lady Theodosia had written "the school-

board." Sir Simon Mount-Simon, who was an inveterate fox-hunter, announced in a clear round hand that he considered stopping at home when it was possible to go out hunting the most foolish thing in the world. Bertha, after tearing up innumerable sheets of paper, had nervously indited "one's own thoughts, sometimes," which drew down upon her from Lord Delachaine a look that was half-enquiring, half-displeased. He and the duke had broken off their conversation to hear the various definitions, and the latter eagerly asked :

"What have you written, Mary?"

Whereupon his wife answered forthwith :

"Giving advice."

"Ah, so it is," said the duke drily ;  
"especially to one's wife."

"No, no, no !" cried the duchess eagerly.  
"To one's husband ! Oh, how I do wish I had written ' especially to one's husband ! ' "

Little Lord Peacham, who was a very young guardsman indeed, had greatly crumpled and twisted up his paper, but was obliged finally to acknowledge that he really couldn't think of anything foolish at all, which avowal was received and followed by such prolonged bursts of laughter that he found himself covered with confusion and blushes, he knew not why.

But now reigned silence. Mr. Cheshire (whom Mr. Bond viewed with some jealousy, and spoke of in whispers as his friend from "Alice in Wonderland") proceeded by special invitation to read aloud a ditty entitled "The lay of the lone one, intended to be set by all the most celebrated composers of the day," and described by its author as "absolutely the most foolish thing in creation."

"The lay of the lone one," repeated he, impressively. Then, in the expectant still-

ness, having sighed deeply, he proceeded thus :

“North wind, prithee tell me  
Why the roses blow ;  
Warm clouds, haste to spell me  
Music loud and low—  
For I sing of nevermore,  
From the future gone before.

“I am all a-weary,  
Fierce my heart like stone ;  
Nay, this world's so eerie,  
Chill'd with undertone—  
And I sing of nevermore,  
From the future gone before.”

A pause followed the reading of this gem.

“It seems to me sweetly pretty,” murmured little Mrs. Mooney ; but she was speedily crushed by the severe looks of her neighbours.

Indeed, nobody knew exactly what to say. Some felt incompetent to administer such nicely-balanced praise as should gratify the author's sense of parody, without detracting

from his fame as a graceful bard. Others silently agreed with Mrs. Mooney, without daring to express aloud any opinion. Surely words less charming have often been linked to tender music before now? One or two—the duke, for instance, and Lord Delachaine—hummed and hawed like ignorant schoolboys, the former, especially, being deeply saddened for the sake of the muse of poesy herself.

It was only Mr. Bond who was enabled to rise to the difficulty :

“Capital, Cheshire ! ’Pon my word, couldn’t be better ! I said you would hit the nail on the head quicker than the rest of us put together ! Who shall say that you’re not the king of all that’s foolish !”

Poor Mr. Cheshire looked rather glum at this praise.

“Save me from my friends !” murmured the duke, in a smiling aside to his wife.

But a murmur of voices now fortunately arose, which drowned Mr. Bond's loud tones, and cloaked Mr. Cheshire's sullen depression.

Then, with great unction and solemnity, the first prize of the evening (consisting of three red counters and two white ones) was unanimously adjudged to the author of the poetic effusion. Some applause followed, but the effort of this applause, following upon Mr. Cheshire's laborious achievement, still further damped the spirits of the company, who speedily dispersed, and bestowed bed-room candlesticks on each other, or accepted them, with a sudden reaction of geniality that was positively startling.





## CHAPTER VI.

THE next morning “dawned lovely,” as Lord Peacham remarked. Indeed he, Sir Simon Mount-Simon, and one or two other enthusiasts had risen early to peep from the window, afraid of a frost. There was no such thing. It had been raining during the night; the ground—even the gravel of the approach—looked delightfully muddy. The air was almost soft—the sunshine gently breaking through a bank of mist. What more could be desired?

The hounds were to meet at the Court that day. People straggled down to breakfast without any attempt at punctuality. The hunters were by no means the first; but, when they appeared, they were all as remarkable



for the neat and trim appearance of their red coats, dainty neckties, and general get up, as for extraordinarily large appetites, whilst their minds seemed mainly occupied with the difficult question of packing nutritious substances into tiny silver pocket-receptacles for future luncheon. Bertha made tea for successive relays of breakfasters with indefatigable zeal ; it was almost trying to her patience to see the belated Mr. Bond arrive at last when every one else had nearly finished.

“ Dear me ! ” he exclaimed, after the first necessary greetings ; “ how kind of you all to wait for me ! How sorry I am to have kept you.”

His unappreciated satire was addressed possibly to the empty places opposite to him, possibly to Mr. Cheshire, who sat, mournfully humped up, tracing designs on the tablecloth with the end of his fork.

“ You had better have some fresh tea, Mr,

Bond," said Bertha, as amiably as she could ;  
"do ring the bell for me."

"Oh, it doesn't in the least signify, I assure you, Lady Delachaine. I love cold tea. I have even thought of writing a new comic song"—this with a wicked glance at his antagonist—"for the use of certain ballad exponents, music-hall singers, or others: to be called 'cold tea.'"

"Really?" asked Bertha, whose eyes were vaguely wandering round the room.

Lord Delachaine was standing near the window, conversing with Sir Simon.

"By-the-bye," asked the earl, "have you heard that Almaïne's shorthorns are to be sold?"

"No!" said Sir Simon, whose powerful monosyllable shook the room. "Is he so hard up?"

"It isn't that," continued the host; "I believe he wants to go in for Herefords."

"And so, Lady Delachaine," continued the irrepressible funny man, "and so, you see, my refrain—addressed and dedicated to my old friend Peter Cheshire, Esq.,—my refrain shall be :

'Tea, tea, a homely brew,  
Tea for me, and tea for you.'

"Charming indeed," said Mr. Cheshire, rising to his feet as he angrily pretended to smother a yawn.

"I saw a flash of scarlet a moment ago, I did indeed!" cried Lord Peacham, who was beating a military tattoo on a further window.

Mr. Bond lifted one finger melodramatically:

"'Ark!" he said :

" 'the 'orn of the 'unter is 'eard on the 'ill.' "

"I really don't think you need sit at table any longer, Bertha," said Lord Delachaine, advancing to the rescue. "I am sure Mr. Bond will excuse you."

“Oh, dear me!” exclaimed Mr. Bond, almost upsetting his breakfast cup with the sudden drop of his eyeglass, and finally, as he failed in his efforts to jerk it up by its string, landing the said eyeglass in the very midst of his tea. “Oh dear,” he repeated, fishing out the eyeglass with his spoon, “it’s the early, the early—the early thingummy that gets the—the what’s its name?”

But he found himself alone in the room.

Every one had hurried to the front door. Sir Simon and Lady Mount-Simon, who lived at the distance of a few miles only, had sent their horses over to the Court the night before, and were now welcoming them with ostentatious affection. On the broad terrace, the gay-coated sportsmen already mustered thickly—the master of hounds, as he called in his dogs and brandished his short whip, making a picturesque centre to the group.

Two or three ladies were also amongst the riders. Lord Delachaine himself was about to mount his horse—a large and solid bay. There was a sense of what the French call “*va et vient*” in the air. Every one was conscious that an important and creditable function was about to take place. Even the swans in the lake seemed less imperturbable than usual, and took their matutinal exercise with noisy splashing, drawing circles and long trailing ripples in the water.

The Duke of Baynham, meanwhile, happy in a dreamland of his own evoking, leaned up against the stone portico, placidly smoking a cigarette. To him, the fact that so many people should leave the house was in itself a source of silent congratulation. The duchess never followed the hounds except in a basket-carriage; he was glad that such anxiety as he must have felt on her account had she been an ardent huntswoman was

never called into existence. As to Bertha, she had lately learned to ride, but her equestrian art was still of a very mild order ; moreover, she was saving herself for the ball that was to take place that same evening, and therefore she intended to spend the day at home.

“What an awful pity you’re not coming, Lady Delachaine!” murmured little Lord Peacham, as he passed her on his way to his neighing steed. “And you look so fit !”

She was standing in the sunshine, her hair almost as golden as the sunny rays themselves, her figure peculiarly graceful and flexible in her simple grey gown.

“Oh, you won’t want me !” she answered with a light laugh.

“Won’t I though !” retorted Lord Peacham ardently.

Aggie was close behind her sister. The

whole scene was as delightful as it was novel to her. The brown woods, the glint of the November sunshine, the grassy glades that were still green, the well-mounted horsemen, the bright red coats, the impatient hounds—an agitated mass of gently-yelping creatures kept under control despite their eager heads and wagging tails—even the castellated portico and battlemented wall of modern Delachaine Court seemed beautified by these sunshiny and animated surroundings.

A few paces from the front door sat Lady Theodosia, bolt upright in Bertha's pony-carriage. She was going to drive pretty Mrs. Mooney as much across country as possible to follow the hounds. Little Mrs. Mooney herself, a soft inert heap of smiles and furs, did not care in the least for the hounds, though she cared considerably for several of the riders. Lady Theodosia, on the other hand, with an aggressive scarlet

feather in her hat, was on duty bent, and she considered it the height of duty that she herself, Mrs. Mooney, and the silver-bell'd ponies should spend the morning in trying to catch distant glimpses of people who never for one instant tried to catch glimpses of them in return.

Presently, there was what to Aggie's unprofessional mind seemed a kind of whoop and rush all in one, and everybody disappeared as though a magic wand had touched them. Riders, dogs, even the carriages and dog-carts, all had been spirited away like the wild huntsmen of whom Aggie had often read. The enchanted castle remained, but the landscape was suddenly deserted. The duke had apparently been spirited away with the rest. The duchess and Bertha were already strolling arm in arm towards the latter's boudoir. The clever man seemed left in the lurch in his place in



the portico, where he had been engaged in making what he called thumb-nail sketches with a gold pencil on the smooth white shirt-cuff of his left wrist—sketches of the hunt, which were exhibited to the ladies at different intervals of the day, whenever, in fact, as Mr. Bond acidly observed, Mr. Cheshire thought it necessary to “shoot his linen,” though the drawings themselves, with passing hours, as his adversary did not fail to add, mercifully grew “faint and ever fainter.”

Aggie knew not whither to wend her way. Bertha never seemed to sit down or be otherwise than busy, nor did she require companionship or help. She was, in fact, perpetually occupied in giving orders and, as she called it herself, “seeing after things” most unremittingly. The dowager never noticed the child. Even the duchess on this particular day seemed pre-occupied, and only looked up to nod encouragingly from her

French novel every now and then. As she was apt to explain, she considered it a positive social duty to study a French novel occasionally; it gave her such a pull in working for the benefit of humanity.

At luncheon all the stay-at-homes met. Mr. Cheshire let it be thoroughly understood that he had transacted much business during the morning, and "got through" some really important work. Mr. Bond, who said he had been out for a walk, ate enormously, and was at first fairly silent. The duke strolled in towards the end of the meal, with his hair on end and a sauntering benevolent aspect intended to express that he, for his part, had been quite idle. Lady Theodosia and Mrs. Mooney returned rather late—luncheon was nearly over. Mrs. Mooney's face wore the most disappointed expression imaginable, and her hair, which early in the day was artistically and beautifully crimped, now hung

forlornly about her temples. Lady Theodosia looked brisker than usual.

"They found in Coplar's wood," she announced; "a little boy told us; I think he must have been Matthew Gibbons' son. You know Coplar's wood, Bertha—a couple of meadows beyond Five Elms hollow and widow Prince's barn. They will have a splendid run—right in the direction of Sir Simon's own estates."

"That will be nice," said Bertha dreamily.

"Nice!" repeated Lady Theodosia with some surprise. Then she gave a short laugh.

"When you have spent two or three winters at the Court, you will become quite up in hunting matters, Bertha."

"I suppose so," said Bertha reddening slightly. "Won't you have some more gingerbread nuts, Mr. Bond?"

"Thank you, Lady Delachaine. 'Les petits cadeaux entretiennent l'amitié.'"

Every one stared.

Mr. Cheshire gravely passed the biscuit dish.

"Here you are, Bond. Surely an invitation to a country house includes board and lodging. But I think you ought to hurry up; you are keeping the ladies waiting."

"Thanks, old man," returned the other, calmly helping himself. "I was going to say, Lady Delachaine, when my friend here interrupted me—do you remember how a German turned the well-known saying into: 'Les petits gâteaux entretiennent l'amitié'?"

"I have never been able to comprehend," began Mr. Cheshire thoughtfully, "why the Teutonic accent is peculiarly distressing with regard to the French language. But perchance the Saxon or Scandinavian races, versus the Latin——"

"I say, Cheshire," interposed Mr. Bond; "forgive me, but I think you ought to

hurry up. You are keeping the ladies waiting."

"No," said the duchess, laughing; "you see we are going already."

She rose as she spoke, obeying Bertha's signal, and the whole party now pushed back their chairs, and departed, wandering away in divers directions.

The afternoon, laboured through somehow, by means of various devices which well-behaved country-house visitors are wont to adopt, such as a quiet walk in the flower-garden, a refreshing hour of real London gossip from the depths of armchairs, a little fancy-needlework, or a book of photographs, was chiefly cheered by the skirmishing animosity of conversation between Mr. Bond and Mr. Cheshire.

These champions were apparently never tired of tilting, being drawn together by the law of antagonism. It was difficult to say

if they were in fun or in earnest. Yet it must be owned that actual provocation arose almost always from one quarter.

"Wit and Learning, that's what we are, we two," explained Mr. Bond complacently. "I am the latter to an almost painful degree; is it not so, Cheshire, dear boy?"

"I am sure I don't know," returned Mr. Cheshire aggrievedly. Like all serious persons when goaded overmuch he took momentary refuge in silence. He was crossly meditating a suitable repartee whilst his adversary rambled on.

"My dear fellow, you remind me of the Scotch divine, who was asked some erudite question, and replied tersely: 'I dinna ken and I dinna care.'"

"And quite right too," said Mr. Cheshire. "There are many occasions upon which it is decidedly better to reserve one's judgment."

“‘O learned judge!’ ‘O wise young judge!’”

A few of the guests were sitting in the hall, when Lady Theodosia returned from a short brisk afternoon walk. She had felt no need to “keep fresh” for the evening, as did several of the other ladies. She was not likely to dance, for the Terpsichorean art was a pastime which, even if urged by the most amiable of would-be partners, presented no attraction to her. She had not therefore been desirous to spare her feet. “Good wholesome exercise should be taken every day,” she remarked, “no matter what excitements are in store.” Nor did she trouble concerning her complexion. She never sheltered nor concealed it behind a veil; Boreas, when he blew his sturdiest, was welcome to witness Lady Theodosia’s thin bony cheeks reddening, and her somewhat aggressive nose turning bluer and bluer.

Mr. Cheshire rose to offer her a chair.

"Pray come and join us, Lady Theodosia. I am sure you have been to your cottagers. Always good works ! And such a fascinating village ! I was just telling Mrs. Mooney of its loveliness."

"Yes," said Mrs. Mooney, fixing her large eyes with a look of pathos on the muddy edges of Lady Theodosia's black and white tweed skirts. She herself, clad in a tea-gown of sea-green plush and gold embroidery, and holding in her delicate hands a Japanese fan, reclined amongst many pillows with considerable comfort and satisfaction. She had recovered from the disappointments of the morning, and had recurled her limp hair. She was rather fond of Mr. Cheshire. He required no answers to his remarks ; these latter were lengthy and harmless, and Mrs. Mooney had often been known to say of herself : "I may have many faults, my dear,



but I really am a good listener—a most patient listener. And that's what men like best, so why shouldn't I be?" Why indeed? as Mrs. Mooney's friends somewhat ironically argued. Now she said, softly and sentimentally :

"So delightful! Nothing like a village!"

"Yes," continued Mr. Cheshire eagerly, much spurred on by her appreciativeness. "Yes, Lady Theodosia, as I was telling Mrs. Mooney, who thoroughly agreed with me, it is the village green that is above all so charming, so refreshing."

"There does not happen to be one here," put in Lady Theodosia with severity.

"Ah no, no! Of course not. Do not let us localize. It is all the same according to my theory. It is the idea of waste land in these horrid socialistic times, the rural hedgerows where the wild rose and hawthorn bloom—what matter if they take up

a little precious space from the furrowed fields that imply hard work, and silver or perhaps even copper coins—the sweat of man's brow, the chink of filthy lucre? Let us put all science and progress aside for a moment."

"Ah yes," sighed Mrs. Mooney, with evident relief.

"Let us reflect upon the beautiful. Let us be quietists, philosophers in our way. My dear lady, similar to these green spots which you love are the silent moments of our thoughts and brains. In the present days of over-hurry and over-pressure, we have no mental waste land."

"Speak for yourself!" interposed Mr. Bond, who had approached unseen and now stood immediately behind his opponent's chair. "Speak for yourself," he repeated with loud laughter. "Every man knows best about his own property. There is

plenty of waste land in my head, Cheshire, I assure you. None of your high-pressure agriculturists are allowed there. Can I offer it you at a very low price?"

"I do not understand you," said the serious man with dignity. "It seems a pity to turn everything into ridicule."

"Surely not my head," retorted the other. "This is the very first time you have shewn any respect for it or its contents. Mrs. Mooney, did you ever hear Jack Broadway's ode to a friend of his who is a great literary light? It begins:

'O giant head! O giant hand!'

Even Lady Theodosia laughed.

"It reminds me," continued Mr. Bond, "of the learned man—one of our great historians, I think—who was quite unaccustomed to woo, and addressed a French lady thus:

“ ‘Que vous avez de jolis petits yeux, madame !’

“ And when rebuked, he went on :

“ ‘Que vous avez de charmants grands pieds !’ ”

“ Ah, here comes our châtelaine ! ”

Bertha, as she approached the little group, found it hard not to wrinkle her brows into a slight frown. She felt so increasingly strong a dislike towards Mr. Bond that she could scarcely conceal it. Seldom is it the case that a hostess views with disfavour the guest who forces all other guests to laugh ; is not the society buffoon's chief guerdon a gracious look from the otherwise anxious and pre-occupied countenance of “ the lady of the house ” ?

Mr. Bond had been invited at the last moment ; he had long been a slight acquaintance of the Delachaine family. Lord Delachaine, having always regarded “ the funny

man" as a mysterious personage totally unlike himself, a human being, doubtless, (though scarcely to be viewed as such, but rather as a facetious piece of mechanism to be wound up for other people's amusement,) an attraction to be met with in high-class country houses as regularly as a roast partridge on the first of September or a roast pheasant on the first of October—Lord Delachaine having hitherto viewed Mr. Bond with this contemptuous tolerance, had nevertheless advised Bertha to invite him to the Court. It had been on a certain afternoon when, weighed down by a score of refusals from "dancing men," Bertha had repaired to her husband's room for consolation and advice.

"Do think, John," she had pleaded.  
"Think of men.

"It is a most profitable subject," the earl had said, with his queer slow smile drawing

his mouth to one side. And, after a pause, he added :

“ Why, there's that fellow Bond. I dare say you would like him. He always makes everybody roar. I don't know how he dances, though.”

“ Oh, never mind *how*,” Bertha had answered, being at that moment greatly distraught. “ If only he can come ! ”

But, as to liking Mr. Bond, she simply instantly hated him ! From the first moment that she set eyes upon him, she felt an unconquerable aversion for him. Whether he would ultimately return this feeling, even if in less degree, she cared not ; she did not trouble to think on such a subject. Dislikes, even as likes, are mostly mutual. Bertha was almost uncivil to this one of her guests. She fled from his presence at every possible opportunity ; she did not choose to laugh at his jokes. They were vulgar enough, often-

times, surely ; but Bertha did not discriminate ; to her they were all equally unendurable.

She even preferred the long-winded platitudes of Mr. Cheshire, who had also hitherto been a stranger to her. Whenever she found a moment to spare from her universal duties as a hostess, she gladly came to the rescue of the slow-witted "clever man," and placed two or three barbed arrows of speech in his hand. She would not herself converse with Mr. Bond, but she hoped earnestly that some of these darts might reach him through the rhinoceros-like hide of good-humoured vulgarity within which he seemed encased !





## CHAPTER VII.

THE social afternoon was mercifully short, however. Mr. Bond made a proposal to play "dumb crambo" after tea, but no one responded.

As dusk drew on, the hunting folks, having straggled homewards, straightway betook themselves to their bed-rooms for a long rest before dinner, whilst several of the others, exhausted by doing nothing, equally professed great anxiety to be thoroughly fresh for the fatigues of the ball, and retired long before dressing-time with a view to a novel or a snooze.

Dinner even was a hasty meal. The gentlemen were speedily left to themselves



to talk over the prowess of the day, whilst the ladies, who had dined in tea-gowns, were nothing loth to give themselves plenty of time for the donning of more splendid raiment. Bertha, when fully equipped, sent for Lord Delachaine to see her.

She stood before a large pier-glass, dreamily surveying her own reflection. Her dress was perfect, her entire appearance everything that could be wished. Her gown had come direct from one of the most expensive and world-famed "artistes"; her maid had piled up her hair as dexterously as becomingly. And, better than all, it was a beautiful face which gazed back at her from the mirror: two eyes like shadowy lakes, a rosy mouth, a complexion that defied competition. Bertha would surely be the queen of the ball, even as she was already the ruling power at Delachaine Court.

All of a sudden the mouth grew sorrowful,

the eyes clouded. Thoughts, vague yet sad, filled and dominated that lovely presence.

She was clad in some gossamer silvery garment, the effect of which, heightened by diamonds and pearls, gave her the appearance of a water-nymph or nixie ; a jewelled water-lily rested on her golden hair, but, except for the bouquet of white orchids which she carried, she wore no flowers.

It was of a fairy tale that Bertha thought ; one she had wished, years ago, to illustrate—the history of a water-sprite, a being strangely human, but soulless, who longed for immortality. Bertha had often evoked this pretty dream-heroine, imagining her somewhat like the reflection which beamed before her now, with a pleading look, a speechless desire to be swayed by something, she knew not what ; piteous, eager, the face should be—pining for a better fate than its

own, held back by invisible bonds and unknown laws. . . .

The voice of Bertha's maid echoed shrilly down the passage in language that was a jumble of French and English. Then came the measured sound of a well-known step which always commanded silence. Lord Delachaine entered the room. He paused a moment at the door, gazing in admiration that was almost astonishment at the beautiful vision before him.

Then he approached a step or two nearer. His lady turned her head and smiled at him.

"Yes, you look well, very well, Bertha," he said.

He was greatly contented. His wife was as satisfactory to his pride as to his affection. Who could now dare to depreciate the object of his choice? Certainly, not even his own relations. This was surely the fairest Lady Delachaine who had ever "trod a measure"

in the halls of either the present Court or of that ancient building which had been razed to the ground by fire—though neither flame nor time could obliterate the ever-living traditions of its lovely women.

Meanwhile, the earl repeated :

“Bertha, my dear, you look very well.”

Then he went up to the shining figure, and took its gloved nervous hand gently in his, whilst he pressed his lips on its white forehead with a sedate kiss. Somehow, all Bertha's warmer nature thrilled under the touch, and tears rose to her eyes which shone (thought the earl) yet more dewy and lovely than before. She held his hand tightly for a moment.

“John?”

“Yes, my love.”

“I want to ask you——”

“Anything that I can do,” began the earl courteously.

"It is not that ; it is. . . . Are you sure—quite sure, John," asked Bertha hesitatingly, almost tremulously, "are you quite certain that you like me just as I am ?"

"My dear!" exclaimed Lord Delachaine with more surprise than actual reproach. His wife's question jarred upon him, he knew not why. Surely it was late in the conjugal day for idle protestations of adoration. Pretty women are justifiably tyrants, doubtless, and yet Bertha must know well what he felt. And, besides, he would like to see in her a certain amount of haughtiness, a dignity befitting the partner of his life. Then, swiftly and unreasonably there flashed through his mind another thought—a bitter thought, which must be cast out without delay. And he spoke hastily :

"I think I ought to go down because, you know, people will be coming early. I fancy the Johnsons have arrived already, and

they may be a little huffy, for, of course, they are not quite certain of their own position. And they won't know a soul. Besides, I ought to have a word with Harris to make sure that the arrangements are all right. Shall I send Francine to you? Are you quite ready?"

"Yes, yes," said Bertha as she turned away a little impatiently; "I am quite ready. I don't require anything. Go down, John—I'll come in a minute. I want to go to Mary's room first, and see if she is ready too."

She hurried along the corridor.

"Come in!" cried the voice of the duchess in answer to a gentle knock. That lively lady was sitting at her toilet-table; she was chatting energetically. Even had Bertha not known the room she must have been guided to it by the familiar voices in altercation.

The duchess sat with her hair partly down, though she was quite dressed for the ball, and close behind her stood—not her maid, but the duke, who, with the most awkward efforts, was endeavouring to fasten something into the curls at the top of her head.

“My dear Cas!” the duchess expostulated, “how you do hurt! You treat my poor skull as if it wanted a literary ‘erasure’! And what will people say to this new fashion? Well, perhaps, as my old nurse used to say, ‘Il faut souffrir pour être belle.’ I shall be transcendental presently, shall I not? Why, Bertha, are you quite ready? Oh! You are a fairy queen! Isn’t she, Cas? A perfect dream of beauty! Whilst wretched me—— Only imagine, my hair was dressed in the very latest fashion, and quite done, when this dear old thing——”

“It was hideous, Lady Delachaine,” inter-

rupted the duke, "positively frightful. Diamonds don't suit Mary at all."

"When this dear old thing," continued the duchess imperturbably, "fished out a silly little sprig of white heather that had been on the chimney-piece since yesterday, and insisted on my wearing it for luck."

"Well!" said the duke calmly, "and it is lucky."

"And you see what a figure I am!" said his spouse, turning upon her hostess the countenance of a happy milkmaid.

Bertha smiled. It was a sad smile, nevertheless, and a sudden mist of tears, gathering in her eyes, blurred away the image of the duke, who had now seized a comb and was proceeding to pat down his wife's refractory locks with better intentions than dexterity.

"If you would only stop quiet," he urged. "Pray give me a hairpin; I do assure you that a hairpin held between the teeth is the



sign and symbol of a first-rate hairdresser. Now you are finished."

"Oh, am I?" said the duchess drily.

She rose to her feet, and with a few judicious strokes and touches of her own fingers she concluded her husband's handiwork, so that her head became positively presentable.

"I must have this *one* star in, Cas. No, not any if you would rather not."

She ran to her spouse, and, standing on tip-toe, she impetuously threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"You have made me a regular guy!" she said, laughing contentedly.

And Bertha thought that her friend had never looked so well, albeit the duchess herself continued loud in her expressions of reproach and self-pity.

Then they all went downstairs together.

The neighbours had responded most

eagerly to Lady Delachaine's invitation. The ball-room—a large saloon cleared of all furniture, and decorated with wreaths of evergreens and flowers—presented a gay spectacle. A string band from the neighbouring town played its best ; laughter and happy conversation filled up the pauses of the music.

Lady Delachaine's little sister had, as a special favour, been allowed to sit up. It was not a favour which brought to the recipient any great happiness. Her experience of the world was too slight to enable her to know how truly forlorn it is possible to be in the midst of a gay crowd, and therefore she grew disappointed with herself, and more and more wretchedly shy as the night wore on. At first, two or three gentlemen asked to be her partners, but she did not care for dancing as a pastime, and she was always reticent with strangers. She

was too old to be treated as a child, too young to be viewed as a girl; she could neither be "drawn out," nor flirted with, nor even amused and petted. An uncontrollable wave of melancholy seemed to swallow her up; she would have given worlds to go upstairs to her own bed-room, but she knew that a hasty flight must appear ungrateful in the eyes of every one. She was even vaguely conscious that such a course of action would injure Bertha, and make it appear that Bertha herself could not be thoroughly used in the ways of society since her little sister was ill-mannered and ignorant. Aggie, in her soft white muslin frock and pale sash, with her hair flowing over her shoulders, was terribly aware of her own defects, and of her own impotent wish to do better, but she was utterly unconscious of the admiration that followed her about wherever she went. It was an admiration

unusual regarding one so young ; but there was something about her which often prevented people from treating her as a child, and in her simple serious-heartedness she seemed to have little in common with things of the earth, earthy.

Nor did Lady Theodosia smooth matters by making her appear more ordinary.

"She's a little savage, that child ! For her age a perfect tartar. Awfully spoilt ! She's not been brought up at all. Pulled up, I should say, or left to come up at her own sweet will."

"By Jove, she's not done badly, then," said an elderly colonel under his moustache ; "that is, as far as one can see !"

"That's it—so far as you can see," retorted Lady Theodosia testily ; "in home life, I assure you, she's absolutely unendurable. But she's going to have a governess soon, thank heaven !"

"A backward child?" asked the colonel smiling. "Poor little recruit!"

Aggie had overheard the word governess, and had seen the expression of Lady Theodosia's face; she likewise saw smiles on the faces of the listeners. She guessed that she was not being well spoken of—besides, she did not want to play the eavesdropper. She energetically threaded her way onward a few steps. Being all alone and therefore silent, and also unable to move quickly through the crowd, how difficult it was not to overhear what everybody was saying! Scarce a yard from her, but apparently unconscious of the proximity, Bertha was waltzing with Lord Peacham. On Bertha's cheeks were two hectic spots of red—she and her companion paused in the dance with a sudden abrupt movement.

"Yes, of course I will come to supper with you," said Bertha in an odd hard tone.

And Aggie went on her way again a few steps.

"Do you give it up?" Mr. Bond was saying to his partner; "it's really quite a first-rate riddle, you know, only I don't think I've got it exactly right. What's the difference between an iron-clad and Johnson's dictionary?"

"They are both heavy, I suppose."

"That is a likeness, though. Ah! Now I have it! There's such a lot of difference it would take me quite two hours to explain. Shall I begin now?"

"Oh, pray don't!" cried the hapless girl, quickly. "Let's have another turn, Mr. Bond," and the two whisked away in the crowd, whilst the funny man murmured softly:

"What larks we are having! Quelles alouettes!"

Aggie made her way to the door. Lord Delachaine looked after her benignantly.

"Shall I find you a partner, my dear?" he asked.

"Oh no, thank you," answered the child hurriedly, whereupon the host, relieved to find that at least one duty was spared him, returned to his arduous task of entertaining a stout and portentous dowager who was in search of refreshment, and who, as she expressed it herself, entirely put herself in the hands of Lord Delachaine.

Aggie wanted no refreshment. She made her way quickly past the dining-room, where the supper-tables with their mayonnaises and chaudfroids, the glaring light, the liveried servants, to say nothing of numerous eating and drinking guests, filled her mind with as much consternation as the ball-room itself. She glided on like a sprite down a long passage that ran parallel with the hall. By a side-door this passage communicated with the library. The latter sanctum she knew

was not to be in use for the guests of the evening. It had been built by Lord Delachaine's father, who was a great reader, and somewhat of a recluse, and it was too far removed from the other rooms to be available for society purposes. It was really quite a useless place, as Bertha had herself averred that very morning.

To this apartment Aggie sped with unerring steps, her pace quickening almost into a run as she neared the desired haven. The passage was but dimly-lighted in comparison to the rest of the house. Would the library itself be dark? She turned the handle of the door softly, and pushed gently. No—there was light within evidently, but not much light. There was a comfortable fire, a comfortable green reading-lamp, whilst a comfortable armchair was drawn up on the bear-skin hearthrug close to the fire, and in that armchair most comfortably reposed the Duke of Baynham.



He was reading—absolutely reading! He turned at the sound of the opening door, to peer through the half-darkness at the intruder.

“Hullo, is it you, Aggie?” he asked, his face relaxing into a smile. He was very fond of the little girl, and he was the only person besides Bertha who was permitted to call her by this especial name.

“I didn’t know you were here,” stammered she.

“And I didn’t know you would come,” he returned. “Now that you have come, pray take a seat. How is the ball going on?”

“Oh, it’s perfectly horrid!” said Aggie with heartiness.

“Good gracious! Horrid!”

Aggie crimsoned.

“Well, that’s to say—don’t you understand?”

She was now sitting on a low stool in the firelight, and his amused glance rested on her face.

"It's so—so——" She could not find the right word. Finally she turned towards him imploringly.

"It's so empty."

The duke understood immediately what she meant, and, being sensitive himself, he refrained from laughing as others might have done at the curious adjective bestowed on Lady Delachaine's crowded and successful entertainment.

"Yes," he said kindly, as he laid his open book on the table beside him; "such festivities are, for the most part, exceedingly empty—that is, I fancy I understand what you mean."

Aggie was greatly encouraged by so sympathetic a listener.

"Don't you think," she asked eagerly,

"don't you think it is terribly, dreadfully hollow?"

This time, however, the duke could not help smiling.

"There's a medium in everything. My dear child, when you are a little older you will find that even balls have a certain cheerful side."

"Do *you* like them?"

"Oh, I—why, I'm past that sort of thing."

"Are you?" asked Aggie, gazing at him interestedly. She was not quite sure how old he might be. His fair hair was still unstreaked with grey, but his forehead was excessively wrinkled, and his face was remarkably thin, and not at all young-looking. Yes, certainly he must be over thirty. And as for balls—why, if she herself were not old enough to like them, and the duke too old—what funny things they appeared to be!

"Well, have you made up your mind?"

asked the object of her scrutiny. "Seriously, Aggie, there are empty people to be found in all places, and perhaps pleasant people also. It is the people who make parties pleasant for us, or the reverse. And in so large a multitude as—as——"

He was discomposed in this somewhat commonplace explanation, for along the passage came a great rustling of skirts, and Bertha and the duchess suddenly appeared on the scene.

Bertha looked unusually excited. Her eyes were shining like stars; she seemed unable to sit or stand still. She refused the chair which the duke immediately offered her.

"No, no," she said hurriedly, "I came to look after Aggie. Somebody told me you'd gone off all alone, Aggie; I couldn't think what was the matter."

"Ought I not to have gone?" asked the child.

"Oh yes," answered Bertha dreamily, as though she were thinking of something else. But the duchess had planted herself with a determined air in front of her lord.

"As for you," she began with sternness, "your conduct has been simply disgraceful. Every human being has asked me to-night : 'Where is the duke?' And each time I have answered : 'I think he must be in the next room.'"

"And so I was," answered the culprit blandly. "This room or another—what is the difference?"

"There is an immense difference," said the duchess, absolutely stamping her foot. "And you have been reading, positively reading!"

"Poor me! Well, presently I will say that

'My only books  
Were woman's looks,  
And folly's all they've taught me.'

"I can quote too," said the duchess impetuously. "Wait a minute till I remember :

'Your face, my thane, is as a book, where men  
May read strange matters.'"

"Brava, Mary! Since when have you studied Macbeth?"

"I think I am rather like Lady Macbeth. Don't you, Cas?"

"The likeness is striking, simply overwhelming."

The duchess smiled serenely. Then, suddenly sinking down on a footstool, she leaned her elbows upon her husband's knee, and murmured with a little sigh :

"It's very cosy and comfortable here."

"It is," he echoed warmly. "But have you been enjoying yourself, Mary?"

"Yes, I danced every dance."

He stroked her cheek softly with one finger.

"And flirted?"

"Awfully."

"That's right," he said contentedly.

"And now do you know what I am going to do?" she asked.

"No. 'Souvent femme varie——'"

"Very well, then, I will tell you. I am going to carry you off straight away to the ball-room."

"Oh, please spare me! Lady Delachaine, won't you interfere and save a poor innocent man?"

Bertha was standing with one foot on the fender as she gazed into the red embers of the fire. She roused herself to answer with a short laugh:

"No, no; oh no, indeed!"

And the duke, much against his will, was thereupon led away captive.

Then Aggie rose and put her arm round her sister's waist. The child longed to offer sympathy, but knew not how.

"We must go back," said Bertha uneasily.

"Oh, do stay just one minute! Are you enjoying it, Booffles?"

"Yes, of course. You know I love dancing, and it's a very successful ball; don't you think so, Aggie?"

"I suppose it is."

"I don't fancy any one's been left out," continued Bertha; "there really isn't a flaw."

A moment's pause. Then Aggie spoke, very gently.

"There was one thing I wanted so much to ask you, Booffles, and yet somehow I couldn't, and perhaps you forgot him, and perhaps I ought to have reminded you. Why didn't you invite Dr. Jackson?"

"Why?" repeated Bertha, startled.

"He likes dancing just as much as you do," continued Aggie, who in the glow of the firelight was gazing straight into her



sister's face. "Don't you remember that evening at the Phillimores? And it seems so hard—oh Booffles, it's just as if he'd quite gone out of your mind! And he's poor, and all that."

Bertha did not know what to say.

"Have you made yourself his champion?" she said coldly at last.

"Oh, Bertha!" exclaimed the child reproachfully.

Lady Delachaine turned aside, freeing herself from her sister's embrace. Her heart was beating fast—a crowd of sudden recollections came to increase the mingled emotions which this evening had already brought her. In the very midst of her triumph, surrounded by admiration, and plunged in success, her unsatisfied heart was curiously ill at ease. Advancing a step, and without intention, she took up the book which the duke had laid down. As her eyes glanced down the page

which he had left open, she tried to comprehend the following words :

“Whoever indeed resists love, like a pugilist, hand to hand, is unwise. For love rules even the gods as he pleases, and myself indeed ; and why not another, such at any rate as I am ? ”

“How funny !” murmured Bertha, using a commonplace expression that often serves to cover difficulties. But her senses seemed all unreasoningly on fire. She had impatiently laid down the book without closing it when, by a sudden impulse, she took it up again, turned the pages to find the name of its author, then conned the passage once more. Yet, what was love to her ? A closed page indeed for the future.

She must still the tumultuous beatings of her heart, and live her calm and quiet life, the spouse of Lord Delachaine ; rich, envied, flattered, but not—oh, surely not loved ! Her

mind was strangely dazed to-night. There are so many sorts of love, she thought, and her own laughter seemed to ring foolishly out in the midst of her thoughts. First of all, love like that of the duke and duchess. Oh ! but that could not be mentioned, must not be thought of—such affection is the exception to prove the rule. It is the blossoming of the aloë—a flower that shines forth to the world only once in a century. Married lovers are indeed scarce in these days. In contradiction is a sudden foolish craze like that of little Lord Peacham. Easily attained indeed—not worthy of the sacred name of love—mere common glittering tinsel! And yet dangerous—it had agitated her, somehow. It made her feel that in her own marriage there was perchance small prospect of happiness. And now Aggie must needs bring in the ghost of Edward Jackson. His had been true honest love. Yes, it was

something that might have been worth caring for. Why had Aggie mentioned him to-night especially? And this book—why had it not answered her need more wisely? What did Sophocles, what did any grey-haired old preacher know of the needs of young hearts such as hers?

“Are you not well, Bertha?” broke in Aggie’s voice. The fresh childish voice sounded many miles away. Bertha pressed her forehead with her hand. The one was icy, the other hot—she knew not which. She laughed again—she did not seem able to help laughing to-night.

“You silly little thing! Yes, of course I am well,” she answered gaily. “Listen, there’s the music—it has begun again—another valse, my favourite one—and I’m engaged for everything. Come along, Aggie; you know I can never keep my feet quiet when I hear the tempting strains.”

As she spoke, she ran out into the hall, where there were knots and groups of people all ready to welcome and do obeisance to their hostess.

“How pretty she is!” Approving murmurs rose on all sides as she passed, as she floated on, laughing and talking, and making her way towards the ball-room.

“Lucky dog, Delachaine!” said one.

“Awfully excitable, I should say,” came an answer.

“Most good-looking women are; queer creatures, mere butterflies of fashion.”

“Especially when they’re young,” etc., etc.





## CHAPTER VIII.

TIME passed. The housewarming party had long since dispersed. Christmas had come and gone, spent quietly at the Court. Lord Delachaine was not fond of anniversaries, but he considered it right to keep up old traditions, and he was therefore willing to concede a certain amount of festivity on all such occasions as were dignified or sanctified by custom. Consequently, his agent was annually instructed to dispense seasonable charities to the poor, and tokens of goodwill to the tenants, whilst a fair amount of roast beef, plum-pudding, and mince-pies was scattered about the house, and seemed from thence decorously to permeate the neighbourhood.

All the same, and even on this first Christmas of his wedded life, Lord Delachaine was unwilling as regarded himself and his relatives to encourage any special recognition of the close or beginning of the year. He went to church, of course, for he was a regular attendant at church ; he allowed his wife to send an unlimited supply of flowers for the chancel decorations. From time to time one or two near neighbours were invited to dine, and, after the simple though solemn meal, a rubber was played (not for money), or a little mild conversation was held round the fire on the evergreen subjects of politics, agriculture, or hunting. Otherwise, life at the Court somewhat monotonously pursued the calm and even tenour of its way ; the young Lady Delachaine's horizon seemed to grow narrower every day. Even the dowager and Lady Theodosia took their departure shortly after

the new year ; but this particular narrowing of her home-circle was, it must be owned, to Bertha no deprivation, but rather a source of unmitigated delight—a delight none the less deep because unexpressed.

“ May you live with your relations-in-law ! ” is an Irish curse, the force of which she had now grown thoroughly to appreciate. She had never been accustomed to find herself tried as her two new and near relatives had tried her—daily, hourly, inflicting pin-pricks which, like the historical drops of water of heathen torture, were apt to turn the victim’s brain, to say nothing of the danger of bringing the victim’s life to a premature close !

Bertha was not dead, however, but merely irritated. The only thing which soothed her in what might be termed the wearing of her moral blisters was the fact that her husband seemed irritated also. Although she could not offer to condole with him on the subject,



it was evident that the constant presence of his mother and sister acted by no means pleasantly on the earl's mental cuticle.

He had found himself vexed and annoyed twenty times a day. His mother, though not in herself actually malicious, was urged on by Lady Theodosia to many sayings and doings which were very bitter to Bertha, who was constantly reminded that she was a stranger in the land, ignorant of almost everything of importance, and utterly incapable of maintaining her rightful position. Thus, though the dowager became a mouth-piece to utter uncomfortable insinuations, and was in her serious superiority a standing reproach to the brightness and levity of young Lady Delachaine, it was Lady Theodosia who was the sharpest thorn in Bertha's side, and who, thornlike indeed, cut and pierced her in every direction.

Even in ancient childish days, Lady

Theodosia had held sway over her brother, partly by the very reason that she was much younger in years, but mostly because her mind was immensely quicker than his. Even in youth she had been addicted to shrewd questionings or repartees from which his sensitiveness recoiled. There was a certain simple-mindedness about him which prevented his resenting these sisterly sayings, or in any way retorting except by a chilly reserve which she had never understood. He heard on all sides praise of his sister's cleverness. As he grew up, he did not struggle against her supremacy. According to his tenets it was but right that she should have that supremacy. Women are weak, he argued, and it never occurred to him that, in some things at least, Lady Theodosia was immeasurably strong. Lord Delachaine had found himself the head of his family at an early age. The dignity and tenderness of

fatherhood were in some measure necessarily added to the ordinary duties of an elder brother.

Yet now he was suddenly called upon to protect his young wife from his sister's onslaughts. He had hoped (oh, so earnestly !) that the new tie of imaginary relationship between the two might silence Lady Theodosia's sallies. However bitterly she had railed against the projected marriage, surely, (he thought) when once Bertha should come to sign herself "Bertha Delachaine," all unimportant griefs and vexatious puckers of temper must be smoothed out by the comfortable flat-iron of family life.

It may be argued that Lord Delachaine knew but little of women. Be this as it may, his delusions were not long-lived ; they were gone now, not to return. Yet, though he never lost sight of the necessity of protecting Bertha, he by no means enjoyed the

perpetual need of such protection. Nor, though necessity is said to be the mother of invention, were Lord Delachaine's inventive powers equal to the occasion ; he was worried without being able to cope with the worry, and when, as often happened, he was not above the pretence of a convenient deafness, he neither satisfied nor even imposed upon either party.

The arrival of the new governess, most unfortunately timed immediately after the departure of the dowager and her daughter, disappointed expectation, for it by no means increased the happiness of the diminished home-circle at Delachaine Court. Miss Lawrence was a lady highly recommended, being capable of teaching many foreign tongues, with a fair amount of algebra and Euclid, and also the rudiments of Latin and Greek. She was no mean proficient in the use of calisthenics, the Persian sceptre dance,

etc., and she had taken her degree—if not several degrees—in some learned city, so that there could be no doubt as to her abilities. Perhaps, however, Miss Lawrence's greatest strength lay in music; she was accustomed to pupils for the violin (though she did not herself perform on this particular instrument), she had been known to speak fearlessly of a 'cello, nay, even of a double-bass, and she positively babbled of florid counterpoint. On the other hand, she was never doubtful of her own powers of teaching drawing and painting, though these latter branches of study were clearly not those upon which Bertha was likely to insist.

Meanwhile, the arrangement of a chamber of intellectual torture was viewed by the young patient herself with much awe, not to say terror. Aggie had never lived in a schoolroom before. Indeed, she had never imagined that such an apartment was neces-

sary for the ends of education ; and the prim armchair and shiny new work-table—prepared for the stranger on the new rug by the schoolroom fireside—seemed to her almost as alarming as the enormous maps of Great Britain and Hindostan which Lord Delachaine himself brought home from the neighbouring country town, and which were instantly nailed up by the house carpenter on that same schoolroom's lemon-coloured walls.

Bertha's own heart quailed when the whole arrangement was complete, but Lord Delachaine, who had taken unusual interest therein, was undoubtedly pleased, and his wife felt that she was doing her evident and long-neglected duty, and tried to console herself by the reflection that duty is seldom alluring.

The dreaded day came—the lady arrived. A regular rule of lessons was neatly

planned on the following morning, and for some time strictly adhered to; nor were the hours of study the only ones thus judiciously laid out. A dull walk along the high road with the governess—who refused to open her mouth out of doors because her teeth could not bear the February winds that blew cuttingly across the park—this was the only recreation which the day might bring, and by eventide Aggie was so sadly weary and exhausted that any available amusement presented to her mind nothing more nor less than a continuation of fatigue.

“Miss Lawrence is always advising me to use my brain,” said the child sorrowfully one day to her sister. “How do you think, darling, that I have managed to get along for such a time without using it?”

And Bertha, as she looked quickly up from her piece of embroidery, and saw the pale face and drooping shoulders of her

questioner, failed to see any humour in the situation.

Anxiety concerning Aggie soon made her own cheeks grow pale also. There was assuredly not between herself and Lord Delachaine that ready spontaneous love which is so certain of sympathy that it can pour out every sudden thought or fancy without fear of misunderstanding. Bertha, as she lay awake at night pondering over her difficulties, grew more and more nervous as to the expression of them. Then, when morning came, if haply she brought her courage to the sticking point, Lord Delachaine was unfortunately so busy, and had so many blue magisterial and agricultural documents to attend to, so many newspapers to glance through, so many people of all sorts waiting for him in the hall, that Bertha let him unaccountably slip out of her presence and out of all possibility of conversation,



even whilst she was in the act of commencing to frame her trembling words.

And this happened day after day, and week after week. Or, if she had the chance to mention her little sister's name—and Bertha, her heart beating fast, determined to seize so specially favourable an opportunity—Lord Delachaine would smile his slow smile and say :

“Admirable woman, Miss Lawrence ! Could not be better suited for Julia in any way.”

It was Aggie's own hand which finally cut the Gordian knot.

She had indeed greatly changed during the last year. In looks she was already growing into slender girlhood. It was not only that her childhood was flitting away, however, but that the events—great and small—of the last twelve months had taught her to think deeply on many a problem of

life; they had taught her self-reliance, even whilst they left her too sadly often stranded and alone. Her mind, despite Miss Lawrence's uncomplimentary remarks on the subject of her brain, was as duplex as ever; and, though in some things she still continued to be a very child, she seemed to be rapidly attaining more and more of the attributes of an earnest and thoughtful woman.

One late afternoon, Bertha's boudoir was still unlighted; she had banished the lamps, and she was sitting before the red fire with her arm round her little sister—not very unlike in attitude, though curiously unlike in spirit, to the Bertha who sat thus one memorable evening twelve months ago.

“Booffles, listen to me: I want to go to school,” began Aggie, steadying her voice as much as she could.

“To school!” repeated Lady Delachaine:  
“oh, Aggie!”

She pressed the girl's delicate form more tightly to her heart; tears gathered quickly in her eyes. But there were none in Aggie's.

“Yes,” repeated the latter quietly. “Please let me go, Booffles; it would be so much better for all of us.”

A pang shot through Bertha's heart. Had she in any way sacrificed her little sister? The child quickly divined her thought.

“I mean it will be better for me, dear,” she went on calmly. “You see, I can't get used to Miss Lawrence somehow, and she is never going to like me, because I'm so different to the other girls she's been with, who were never tired of grammar, or roots; and I don't seem to want to learn all the things she says I've got to learn before I'm eighteen, and I think—you won't think me unkind, will you?” went on Aggie, with

heroic subterfuge, "but I am sure it would be delightful for me to play, and run about, and skip, and be shaken up with other girls, as you know Lady Theodosia said when she was here."

Bertha flushed angrily. Even in the fire-light Aggie's uplifted eyes could see the gathering wrath.

"She's right, dear, she is indeed. I don't know about the skipping—I never did like that—but I'm sure about lessons. Let me go to school, Booffles, just for a time, and then I can come back, you know, for holidays."

She wanted to add that she would write very often, and never, never forget her own Bertha, but her poor little courageous heart was full, and she could only kneel silently, pressing her cheek against her sister's bejewelled hand.

Bertha said nothing ; after the first moment

of astonishment and wrath, she could not tell whether the child's proposal were a temptation or no. Certainly, there was but small pleasure now from Aggie's society—whether in the presence of Lord Delachaine and the rest of his family, or in that of gloomy contemptuous Miss Lawrence. Whilst, as for Aggie herself, it was easy to see that she was far from happy.

Bertha made no definite answer, therefore, and nothing further was said that evening, but in course of time the project ripened, and seemed to commend itself more and more to careful consideration.

One day, there came a letter from Mrs. St. Oswald, who mentioned a pensionnat at Paris—by mere chance, as it seemed—and this made an opening which allowed Bertha to explain the whole matter to Lord Delachaine. He was benignant on the subject—far more so, indeed, than his wife had

expected. Perhaps that even he was tired of the terrible presence of Miss Lawrence, although, as he seldom shewed at luncheon, which was the only time of her appearance downstairs and also his favourite hour for a long walk or ride, he had not himself been overmuch burthened with her.

The affair, once arranged, was hurried to its completion. Every one connected with it felt that this was best. Miss Lawrence received her dismissal with haughty indifference, and a passing allusion to two marchionesses who had only lately quarrelled for the coveted distinction of her presence under their roofs. Meanwhile, Bertha and Aggie were alike feverishly anxious, if not to avoid, at least to shorten for one another the pain of farewell.

Bertha went up to London expressly to interview Madame Grillon, the directress of the celebrated "*Pensionnat Grillon*," who

was opportunely in the metropolis, and to whose care for the journey to Paris, as well as for after advantages, Aggie was to be consigned.

Bertha was pleased with Madame Grillon's appearance. That lady was, in truth, a great contrast to Miss Lawrence, being a comfortable homely body, with a sprightly Parisian manner of speech and gesture, and piercing yet good-humoured black eyes. These orbs were doubtless well accustomed to the task of picking holes in every pupil's conduct, but long habit had also taught them to blink leniently at mere "enfantillage."

Madame Grillon frankly acknowledged herself ignorant as regards modern education ; she left all that to superior masters, she said. In her own youth, parents had required but little. In these days—*mon Dieu!*—all is different. *Que voulez-vous?* The desire of parents must be before everything. The

best masters were provided. She herself was content with attending to the moral and physical health of her young pensionnaires. There were plenty of these young damsels, and of all ages. Some were French, some Creoles; others Belgian, English, American, Russian; absolutely—and this Madame Grillon emphasized to shew the true tolerance of her political principles—there was absolutely one German. As to religion, that was also according to the desire of the pupils' parents and guardians.

Bertha went home much relieved. Aggie might possibly be happy at Paris; she must anyhow enjoy change of scene, and cheerful companionship. Madame Grillon's kind dancing eyes, gleaming in the midst of a sea of wrinkles in her pleasant parchment face, had given her visitor a sense of trust and hope with regard to her little sister which Bertha had not experienced for many a long day.





## CHAPTER IX.

THERE is not much to relate concerning Aggie's departure. At the last, the child screwed herself up to a degree of courage and composure which astonished Bertha and gratified Lord Delachaine. She had, so to speak, mentally enacted the coming parting often enough to diminish the sting and smart of it very considerably.

Aggie had nearly broken her heart when her sister married and went away, but the agony of desolation which the child underwent at that time had been gradually soothed by the reflection that events were brought about greatly for her sister's good. Everybody had told Aggie so ; she could not but

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finally believe what so many folks averred, even though to her own unchangeable nature this doctrine was hard to receive. Moreover, since Bertha's wedding much time (from a child's point of view) had elapsed, many things had happened. Aggie's own intimacy with the kindly Baynhams and other friends had immeasurably deepened and strengthened, and, seeing a good deal of the world, (as she thought,) she had grown wiser as well as older. If it had been well last year to leave Bertha and Lord Delachaine to themselves, how much more evidently necessary would it be now? Aggie had become a young Spartan, in very truth, in the habit of putting her own feelings in her pocket. It almost surprised her to see Bertha's unrepressed tears at the near prospect of separation; her own fortitude increased each day, encouraged as it was by the glow of self-sacrifice. How dearly she would have liked to stay here, in

this beautiful home—she Bertha's right hand, as of old ! But it was not to be, and therefore the dream must be dismissed.

No one, perhaps, guessed what strong constraint Aggie put upon herself. The greatest sacrifices we make are seldom appreciated, whilst some careless act of generosity that is a pleasure to ourselves is often highly commended by admiring friends.

Meanwhile, to Jemima the prospect of parting with her youngest charge was a sore grief indeed. She had, since the great wedding, spent many a long day in Aggie's company, growing more and more of a crabbed old tyrant as her heart warmed more and more to the child. Also, since their arrival at Delachaine Court, Miss Julia, as unwilling to neglect her old friend as she was herself glad of that friend's faithful though rugged fellowship, frequently found her way to the dignified "housekeeper's

room," where Jemima held sway, ruling with an iron rod the denizens of that new and lofty sphere of life to which she had been so suddenly promoted. In this pleasing retreat, moreover, were sundry agreeable jars containing ginger, honey, or raspberry, apricot, and other jams, and Aggie was still far too youthful not to be thoroughly delighted with Jemima's ready permission to dip therein *ad libitum*. The housekeeper's room itself, with its old-world couch and straight-backed chairs, and spinet—furniture long since discarded from more favoured apartments—with its formal hyacinths and primulas on the broad window-ledge, and pieces of framed beadwork decking the faded wall-paper—the very room was often a relief to Aggie from the stately halls of the Court, from her own dreary schoolroom most especially.

It was always impossible to conceal, or

even lightly to veil anything from Jemima's keen vision ; so thought Bertha, and it was therefore not astonishing to her when the former, who was silent enough towards her compeers, more than once gave vent before the young Lady Delachaine to such remarks as shewed that, with other household keys, Jemima held the key of the present position firmly in her grasp.

"There's many a pretty flower," grumbled the old servant, "many as people likes well enough in the fields, though it's nothing more nor less than a weed when they stuffs it in a grand garden, where things ain't allowed to grow natural like."

At another time she observed :

"Some poor dears ain't no more wanted than a dog in a game of ninepins ; not if they're worth their weight in gold nor diamonds."

"Won't it be nice for Aggie to go to

France?" hazarded Bertha one day to her old favourite.

"French frogs!" muttered Jemima, who was persistently folding away some fine tablecloths in one of the drawers of a big press. "I've not been taught to think much of 'em myself, nor of them furrin parts, where the benighted creatures ain't got no coal to burn, nor good beef to keep 'em alive. Poor Miss Julia! It's a pity as her own native country ain't good enough for her!"

From which it will be seen that Jemima was one of those sturdy and comfortably-unreasoning British patriots who are fast dying out in these tolerant days. Her grandfather—as she often narrated to Aggie's willing ears—had been a fine soldier at Waterloo, and had fought "Bony" (almost hand to hand, according to Jemima). On that glorious field her grandsire had left an arm—but what of that? He returned home,

incapacitated for life, to be for ever after a welcome burthen to his wife and family, and also to be the pride of his native village, which listened to the tale of his deeds of daring over many a pipe and pot of beer.

After the parting was over, a sense of emptiness and extreme dreariness fell upon the young countess. She felt as if her new life had indeed begun in painful earnest. The shifting scenes of the last year had passed before her like so many portions of a moving panorama; she could not realize anything tangible in them. It seemed to be only now at last, oddly enough, that she found herself really transplanted out of her old London studio, her painting and her companionship with Aggie, to this new stately home, and new stately life.

Her honeymoon and long journeying abroad, the subsequent visitors, the ball, etc., had all left her no time for thought. Now

she was so continually alone, so vacant of occupation and interest that her incessant reflections and weary introspection gave her absolute pain and lassitude. It was a curious fact, she thought, that, during several months which Aggie had spent at Delachaine Court, the sisters had never found time to see each other in peace or comfort, whereas now it was evident to Bertha herself that she had nothing whatever to do from early morn to dewy eve, and she might easily—without any default of duty—have spent long happy days with Aggie. Of course till the new year there were those odious people always in the way, and afterwards that hateful Miss Lawrence!

Why had she not herself undertaken the finishing of Aggie's education? She had assuredly sacrificed both herself and Aggie to her husband. And what of him? As the days lengthened, the earl was out of



doors, and consequently absent, during the greater part of each day. The deserted schoolroom, swept and garnished, had been locked up, its blinds pulled down ; it seemed as though the pale-cheeked Aggie and the tyrannical Miss Lawrence had not only passed out of sight, but had died. Bertha found herself miserably lonely.

This was not the conventional season for the receiving of guests ; shooting and hunting were alike over. Yet Lord Delachaine did not wish to take up his residence in Belgrave Square until after Easter, which happened to fall exceptionally late. To do him justice, it did not occur to him that Bertha wanted companionship. She had got the better of Lady Theodosia, who was routed, for the moment at least. What more could any one want ? The school plan had been of Bertha's own making, and he even imagined that her sister's absence during this necessarily edu-

cational period was an actual rest and relief from anxiety to his pretty young wife. She did not undeceive him, nor indeed was Aggie's absence altogether a loss to her; despite her loneliness, there were many subtle reasons which reconciled her to what she deemed the unavoidable. Yet, now that the child was really gone, and old Jemima relegated to the distant dignity of house-keeper, whilst no one tenanted the long rows of spare bed-rooms, nor spoke nor laughed in the empty hall and great dining-room, Bertha wandered aimlessly about, scarce knowing whereon she should turn her vagrant attention. Painting was out of the question—the very wish for it seemed to have faded out of her mind. Everything connected with studio life was especially connected with Aggie; Bertha could barely remember if she had ever had any real ambition—she was so utterly devoid of it now.

Meanwhile, the days, as they lengthened, brought soft spring weather. She liked to pace the clean gravel walks or tread the velvet lawn. In the flower-beds patches of snowdrops and crocus were giving place to budding tulips and daffodils; from distant fields came the bleating of young lambs; the sky, with its pale flickering sunbeams, was lovely in the extreme behind the tracery of leafless trees, where the rooks' nests—dark patches against the soft grey—were still untenanted. Nature was beginning to awaken, and Bertha was too much of a Londoner, too much also of an artist in feeling, not to observe and appreciate this sweet movement of the early year.

In the evenings she worked or read. She and Lord Delachaine sat opposite to each other at dinner, and conversed stiffly because of the presence of servants in the room. But in the evening her husband would

often give her a conscientious account of his day ; he was so good a landlord, so well acquainted with the whole neighbourhood round that he always had plenty of matter for such conversation. Aggie wrote once a week a short cheerful letter, to which Bertha responded very frequently by long rambling pages.

And thus the time wore on.

There was no change even when the rector and the land-agent came to dinner. The reverend gentleman was unmarried, (Bertha thought she might have made friends with a clergyman's wife,) also high church and ascetic, and by no means in harmony with the young Lady Delachaine's more moderate views, whilst the agent—a widower—was old, thoroughly matter-of-fact, limited as to conversation, and apt to spend his best energies during the evening in preventing himself from indulging in the nap

which he would assuredly have enjoyed at home.

It was with surprise that Bertha was one day roused from her monotonous life by Lord Delachaine himself.

"We must prepare for London soon," he observed with a cheerful smile ; "I hope you are going to have some very pretty gowns, my dear. You will have to be presented, and as, I am afraid, my mother is not quite young enough to act as your sponsor, perhaps we can get Mary Baynham. In fact, I am sure she will be delighted."

Bertha smiled dreamily. In her present state of mind, the idea of London gaieties jarred curiously upon her. It was not that she was unworldly nor (as has been explained) specially contented with her lot, but she had sunk into a kind of torpor ; she had even begun to think it the best thing in the world to be torpid, and she wondered vaguely

whether it would not be more trouble to go to London than to stay on at Delachaine Court.

“Do you want to go to town, John?”

“Well, my dear,” said the earl, looking delighted as he stood on the hearthrug, and gazed at his pretty wife: “I thought you must be getting tired of this quiet life. It really does you great credit——” he began, and then stopped short.

Bertha glanced up quickly. There was something in his face which she could not understand.

“Credit is not the right word,” continued the earl, as he bent down and kissed her forehead. There had been an odd huskiness in his voice as he spoke. Bertha could not comprehend it at all, and yet he was evidently not displeased with her—no, certainly not.

But the next moment he changed the conversation :

"I must go over to Warthrop Grange to-morrow," he said with sudden energy. "There's a new kind of plough Corbett was telling me of yesterday. I shall start in the morning early ; before you're up, I suppose."

"Yes?"

"And I'm afraid I shan't be back till late. However, that's no matter—I suppose you wouldn't care to come with me? No, no, of course not—it's out of the question—a long dull road—I shall just run over in the dog-cart."

"It would be cold," said Bertha, with a slight shiver. "It is not really warm weather yet."

She was used to these short absences of her lord's, and did not care to accompany him on such occasions. She had done so once or twice immediately after her arrival at Delachaine Court, but she had not greatly interested herself in agricultural implements

or pursuits, and had grown chilly and bored waiting about. She had come to the conclusion that she was of no use to her husband under such circumstances.

“I think I may as well stay at home,” she went on, without attaching much significance to her words; but, despite his own careless speech, the earl was gazing at her wistfully—too wistfully, surely, for the subject of ploughs. And yet it must have been only fancy on her part, for the next moment he repeated with cheerful decision :

“Oh yes, you had better stay here. And mind you order those gowns, Bertha !”







## CHAPTER X.

THE following morning Bertha awoke late. She had slept a heavy dreamless sleep ; nevertheless, she was tired, with a strange anxious feeling at her heart that she seemed unable to shake off.

The earl had started soon after daylight ; of course, as she knew, he had a long drive before him. Bertha breakfasted in bed, read her letters, and felt that there was nothing to get up for. Her French maid flitted in and out of the room.

“Which robe would Madame want ?”

“Which ? Why, the brown one, the blue one—no, the grey one.”

It was mid-day when the young Lady

Delachaine wandered down into her boudoir. A large bunch of Parma violets had been placed by the gardener upon her writing-table; the flowers gave forth a strong perfume that filled the room and seemed to overpower her. It was one of those strange, dark, almost lurid days when the atmosphere seems charged with electricity. Her head ached. She must go out.

Bertha hurriedly donned a cloak and hat, and went for a ramble in the woods. Wild anemones, primroses, and bluebells, were already beginning to bloom under the beeches, and the rooks overhead were cawing lustily. Small black shadowy clouds were flying along above, whilst, in regions of greater altitude, paler fleecier clouds more serenely drifted.

There was no human being in sight. Bertha called once, twice, to try the strength and power of her voice; there was no answer.

Only a soft warm wind rustled in the bushes. Only a frightened hare sped suddenly into the copsewood. Down yonder in the mere, a wild duck dived, leaving a streak of bubbles, like a string of idle thoughts, on the surface of the dark water.

Oh! it was unendurable—this silence, this desolation of loneliness, despite the very beauty of it! What ailed her that her heart ached and fluttered restlessly, like a bird at its prison bars, that a sense of youth and warmth of feeling seemed to catch at her throat? What was the want in her life? For what was she looking, waiting? Nothing, nothing, nothing! There could come to her in all the passing years absolutely nothing but this.

She was ungrateful, doubtless, as she willingly acknowledged to herself. Fate had been more than kind to her. Yet was she so constituted as to resent her tame

career, even though it were filled with luxury.

Possibly, Bertha had never known contentment; this virtue is, in truth, the silver spoon which some people are born with in their mouths. It may be a birthright or an heirloom; it is a treasure rarely acquired. Bertha's lot was envied by many; yet hers had been but an exchange of blessings. In place of ambition's glow she now possessed riches; instead of independence a title. Perchance that Lord Delachaine's society might be weighed in the balance against that of Aggie!

Still she was not content. And the worst fact, as it seemed to her—as it seems to so many apparently happy women—was that her deepest feelings must remain for ever locked in her own bosom; human sympathy could never fall to her share. Somehow, she felt that she had forfeited such sympathy.

Nature herself, far from being the consoler that she proves to so many people, only provoked poor Bertha, who was stifled out of doors, disheartened in the sunshine, and irritated by the still beauty of the landscape. The bursting green buds, the singing birds, the drifting clouds in the balmy wind—these brought neither joy nor peace to her undisciplined soul. Yet were they not the only peace-bringers which she was allowed to seek?

Bertha ran home, glad to run and be out of breath. Like a flash of warm light her red cloak came and went between the trees. Then across the lawn she sped; she could not pause, nor stand still. Flushed and excited, she pushed open the garden-door that was close to her own apartment. A servant met her on the threshold, to tell her that luncheon was ready. Yes, she remembered now how she had ordered early

luncheon. She flung her hat down upon a sofa, and went gloomily in search of her lonely meal. She was half sorry after all that she had not accompanied Lord Delachaine. Even the bucolic remarks of the agent or the sturdy farmers might have been a refreshing tonic, she thought.

In the dining-room, hot food had been placed on the centre table—cold food on the sideboard—a fair amount of silver plate on both. Bertha dismissed the butler and the footman, and tried to eat, but she could not. Anything would be better than this solitary grandeur. She went back to her own sitting-room and attempted some embroidery ; her needles broke, the silk entangled itself. Presently, she paused, and clasped her hot trembling fingers listlessly, and leaned her head against the cool marble of the chimney-piece.

Next, she took up a book and forced

herself to read ; what she read she never knew, but she turned over a few pages, and made for herself a momentary occupation.

The time she sought to fill passed slowly ; she had not sat over her book more than ten minutes when a servant entered the room bearing a telegram on a silver salver.

A telegram ! A common thing enough, yet Bertha in her present nervous frame of mind seemed with strange prescience to realize a sudden disaster. Her fingers trembled so that she could scarce tear open the envelope. The servant had closed the door behind him, leaving her to this solitary dread. She unfolded the paper. Suddenly, the floor seemed to rise up towards her. Was she swooning ? No, she must rally. Had not her heart already guessed what her eyes were reading in that awful message :

“Julie very ill. Pensionnat Grillon.”

Of course Bertha might have known it all

along—so she argued without reason. There had been something unnatural about the whole day. Why had she dallied and delayed so much? What was she doing here now? She should have been in Paris long ago. A vision rose before her mind of Aggie—Aggie, dying perchance, alone amongst strangers, stretching out feeble arms for her sister, and all in vain.

Bertha passed a hand across her cold damp forehead; with a violent effort she recovered some presence of mind. She rang the bell. The butler appeared.

“When does the next train leave for London?” she asked breathlessly.

“Directly, my lady. I am afraid it would be almost too late——”

“Too late?”

Bertha stamped her foot in unaccustomed irritation.

“Let the carriage come round instantly—



tell the coachman instantly. I must catch the train at any cost!"

At any cost? The butler stared. He had never seen young Lady Delachaine so agitated. But she did not herself feel agitated. She was cold and self-contained. She moved quickly and noiselessly. She did not hesitate regarding what she must do. She went straight upstairs to her bed-room, and rapidly arrayed herself in dark simple clothes. Even whilst she did so, she called her maid Francine, and asked for Jemima.

"But Madame knows," explained the girl, "Madame gave Mademoiselle Jemima the orders to go to her own home for three days."

"True," said Bertha with ready acquiescence. She was disappointed. But there was no one to whom she could express her disappointment, so she remained silent.

"Shall I not come with Madame?"

"You? Oh no," said Bertha hastily.

She heard the horses' hoofs and the roll of wheels plainly, for her bed-room was immediately over the portico. She sped downstairs. In the hall stood the butler, watch in hand.

"The coachman thinks you may just catch the express, my lady."

Bertha bowed her head without wasting words. She sprang into the carriage; the door was hastily shut, and she was whirled away to the station.

The drive seemed like a flash—so rapid, so strange—and Bertha in her excited mood realized neither time nor place.

There was but a scanty chance to catch the express. The station gate was already closed; a warning bell was ringing; the porters would have admitted no one save so well-known a person as Lady Delachaine. She was helped, almost thrust into an empty

compartment ; the door was banged, a flag waved, and the train was in motion before she could sit down and become aware that she had actually started for London.

It was very long since Bertha had travelled alone. In her former mission to Madame Grillon, she had taken Jemima as companion by Lord Delachaine's especial desire, and had been sped on her way by all kinds of decorous arrangements. There was a wildness about this unexpected journey which, but for the thought of Aggie, was almost pleasurable.

Meanwhile, the peculiar numbness that often accompanies great mental pain or effort had seized upon her. She tried to reflect, but she could not. She fell into a kind of stupor : alone as she was in the carriage, she dozed or dreamed, or lay in a kind of trance. She was glad that for the moment, at least, she need not bestir herself ; she was tired though she had done nothing to fatigue

herself, and she knew that she would want all her strength and courage presently in Paris. For the moment, therefore, it was enough for her that the train bore her on at fullest speed ; that speed calmed and satisfied her. She could do no more than this. Yet, as time passed, her one agonizing idea took complete and painful possession of her, and expelled all rest or comfort. She could not cease to see Aggie before her—Aggie dying. It was a scene which she had often pictured in former days of idleness or nervousness. Now it grew each moment more appallingly vivid. The child's face was pale, her hair was tossed back, her hands were outstretched, as she called in piercing accents for her sister who should bring aid and cure, too late, too late ! In Bertha's ears rang, like an old refrain, the piteous childish words which had often haunted her :

“ If I were ever ill, Booffles, promise you

would come to me directly—quite directly—promise—promise.” And again : “ If I were ill I should like to have you and Dr. Jackson. Just you two.”

Once, and once only, a thought of Lord Delachaine crossed Bertha's mind. The dreamlike veil that so obscured her brain was densest when she remembered Delachaine Court or anything connected with it. All seemed secondary to that vital interest which swayed her very being. It was a pity, she thought, that Lord Delachaine had been absent.

“ I must telegraph to him—oh, I must telegraph to him as soon as possible,” she murmured, and then dismissed the consideration, to pray, for the hundredth time, that the train might speed yet more swiftly onward to its destination.

“ Luggage, ma'am ? ” asked a porter.

Bertha was almost too bewildered to

answer. She found that she had reached London; people were getting out of other carriages; she must do likewise. She walked heavily and with difficulty, despite the excitement which made her heart beat furiously. She must shake off this sense of moving as in a dream.

The hansom which she had hailed now bore her swiftly along the London streets, and the evening air—for there was a fresh wind—lashed her cheeks and cooled her eyes. As she rolled on, the many familiar localities, the crowded pavements, and jostling vehicles, all were pleasant to her. The friendliness of London life about her seemed to mount to her brain with curious intoxication.

Here at least was movement and invigorating action! Here was the work of the world! Here could be found help, and life, and hope! Bertha, alas! gave no sigh

of regret to the languid cartwheels of country life which she had left behind her. Her thoughts, suddenly cleared of mist and heaviness, and far more swift than the conveyance in which she travelled, were already impatiently standing at Dr. Jackson's door—craving, urging admittance and advice.

How long she took to reach that door she never knew; there were no minutes to be counted in her present frame of mind.

She rang the bell.

“Is Dr. Jackson in?” she asked authoritatively.

The woman who answered hesitated.

“The doctor is not in,” she said slowly.

“But I must see him, I *must*, I *must*,” repeated Bertha.

The servant stared at the visitor, then gazed at that visitor's dress, and back at the eager distraught face.

“Well, if you will come in and wait,” she

said softening a little, "master won't be long. He has just stepped round to see a patient. This way, ma'am. The doctor never sees patients so late in the day. Perhaps you'll just walk into his study? It's more comfortable-like than the other room. That's all no-how, 'cause of the sweeps as was here."

Bertha followed hurriedly.

"I'll let him know the moment he comes in—perhaps you'd like to see the newspaper," said the maid as she departed.

It was a quiet retreat in which Bertha found herself left alone. At the end of a long passage—floored with oil-cloth, and of necessity lighted by gas even in daytime—this oasis was hidden, free from all disturbance, for there were no rooms built above it, free from noise, for the distant hum of a street organ from the adjoining mews was hardly to be accounted a distinct sound.

Bertha cared for no newspaper. She



could not read. She gazed around her, drawing long sighs of intolerable impatience.

She had never been in Dr. Jackson's house. Here was evidently his own sanctum. The walls were literally lined with books ; a small writing-table in one corner differed greatly from any professional piece of furniture such as she might have expected to see. This old-fashioned little *escritoire* was littered with open sheets of manuscript, whilst on the top shelf stood a few photographs ; and there, prominent amongst the rest, whose cheap frames and dingy aspect bore witness to the slender favour in which they were held, one gleaming in its velvet frame was a portrait of Bertha, which she herself had given the young doctor scarce more than a year ago.

How well she remembered the day on which she had bestowed the gift ! Despite present distress, that scene rose vividly and

trenchantly before her. Aggie had first begged it for the doctor; then he had taken his own cause in hand, and pleaded it dexterously enough. Finally, the photograph was granted to him, and much mirth had been occasioned by the suggestion that some rich patient—then still a *rara avis*—should receive an extra visit in order to cover the expense of a suitable frame for the photograph!

Bertha turned away with an impatient sigh. To sit passive was torture to her. She paced the room, forcing herself to examine its contents, in order to occupy her mind.

The heavy dreamlike feeling returned as she did so, gathering over her; and, as in some phantasy of sleep she gazed around, partly conscious of an inexplicable familiarity with what were in truth unknown objects. For, as regards an intimate friend, if we find ourselves suddenly transported to his actual

dwelling-place—that domain which is a true index of his mind—concerning which we have perhaps often wondered and speculated, all inanimate things seem to be strangely fraught with the taste and character of their owner. The whole arrangement of the room—and still more each tiny thing therein—testifies aloud to his well-known habits and idiosyncrasies.

Even had Bertha not been aware in whose room she now stood, she must have guessed that Edward Jackson had pushed the armchair, with its attendant little table, in that particular manner close to the fender. (Many a time had a chair been pushed just so, close to the grate of her own studio.) And it needed no special information to tell whose hand had flung down this half-read book in a way exceedingly reprehensible, crumpling and injuring the pages, as she had herself so often explained to the obstinate doctor.

Nor, as she noted the withered cowslips in a small vase on the mantel-piece, could she forget that those flowers were favourites of his, and that, though he owned no spare cash for luxuries, he was wont to bestow a penny or two willingly on any half-starved street vendor in return for a bunch of sweet spring cowslips. Nor did Bertha's eyes need to rest enquiringly on a small oil-sketch of her own painting which, like the photograph, was one of the few evidently enshrined objects in the room, hung as it was apart, immediately above a china service which she recognized (by hearsay) to have belonged to the young doctor's mother, together with a framed and glazed autograph letter from some world-famed *Æsculapius*—a letter which her friend had more than once mentioned to her as valued by him far beyond any marketable price. It was clear that Dr. Jackson kept such favourite memories close to his heart;

very clear, thought Bertha, suddenly remorseful for her harshness and forgetfulness—for had she not left him without word or sign during more than a year, regardless of a long friendship which should not have been so lightly forgotten? His honourable wooing—no disgrace to him nor to her—should not have been a bar between them; surely not, for he had been a true friend in every sense of the word, Aggie's friend as well as her own; and, as she thought this, a cry of pain escaped from Bertha's lips, and she wrung her hands in impotent and overwhelming misery.

Why this delay? Must Aggie die? Bertha's feet seemed glued to the ground. Why could she not fly to the child? Who was there to help if Dr. Jackson did not come? Where could she go? What could she do? And, as she stood thus, bound as in some horrible nightmare, and torn by

agonizing uncertainty, there came quick steady familiar steps along the passage, the handle of the door was noisily turned, and the young doctor stood before her.

"I beg your pardon," he said as he entered; "I have kept you waiting. I do not see patients so late, but if it is for an urgent case——"

There had been a half smile of welcome on his face as he entered the room; suddenly, the smile, like the words, died upon his lips. He stood still, transfixed with astonishment.

Despite her agony of mind, Bertha could not but be cognizant of his extreme emotion. He made a rapid stride forward.

"You—you——" he began, in a low deep voice.

Bertha involuntarily took a step back.

"I came—I could not help it," she stammered. "Oh, Dr. Jackson, you must

come at once to Paris ! Aggie is desperately ill ! ”

She waited to see the wave of pity that she expected break over his countenance, and soften the hard strange look that had come into it ; but no, it was not to be. He advanced another hasty step, he stretched out his arms, and, clasping her waist and shoulders in a sudden and violent embrace :

“ You here,” he murmured hoarsely—“ oh, my God ! ”

Bertha reeled. It seemed that she must have fallen into his arms ; but nay, she could not fall, for those arms were straining her close, tightening about her, and, before sense and presence of mind returned to her, he had dragged her face towards him, and had covered it with kisses, repeating under his breath :

“ Oh, Bertha—Bertha—you here—you here ! ”

The next moment she had dashed away from him, and stood, trembling with wrath and terror both, at the further end of the room. She had left him standing mute. His arms dropped nervelessly at his side; he rose up slowly and unsteadily, walked to the door, and flung it wide open. Then he turned to her.

"Tell me what it is you want, Lady Delachaine," he said in an altered voice; "I am ready to do your bidding."

But she could not answer him; her lips opened, yet could utter no sound. She dropped into a chair; she was trembling violently, and half-fainting.

"Forgive me," he pleaded brokenly, though turning his eyes from her and still standing by the door. "Forgive me if you can. It was all so sudden. I was a fool; worse than a fool. I think I understand what you wish of me. I am quite ready now—I will go



with you to Paris. Let me see—we must start at once; I will get the time-table.”

He left her, but returned almost immediately.

“We have not an instant to lose,” he said speaking very fast. “Have you a carriage? Servants? No? Or is that hansom yours?”

Bertha nodded. How could she frame words of indignation? The rightful moment for such was already past and gone. And she could not, would not give up what meant life for Aggie.

“Have you had no food?” asked Dr. Jackson.

Bertha shook her head impatiently.

“You must have a glass of wine,” he continued with medical authority. “There is no time for anything else.”

But a sudden recollection had come to Bertha. She roused herself. “I must send a telegram,” she stammered.

Was there indeed not a moment to spare, in which to pause and think? She passed her hand over her aching forehead. The necessity of so much haste seemed to press upon her and paralyze her.

Dr. Jackson silently handed her a form that lay upon his writing-table, together with a pencil. She wrote a few hurried words—she scarcely knew what she wrote; then gave back the form folded into his hand.

“I will see that it goes,” he said, as he took it and left the room. Despite his apparent calm, he could not stay and speak to her. He had been roaming about whilst she wrote, and hastily gathering up a few papers, a pocket-book, a pair of gloves. . . . Now he strode, almost ran down the passage. “Martha, Martha,” he called, “bring that wine quickly.”

The servant brought some wine and biscuits to Bertha, who ate and drank a couple of

mouthfuls mechanically. The doctor, she was told, was waiting for her in the street. She put the wine-glass hastily down and ran out also.

She climbed into the vehicle ; Dr. Jackson helped her in ; he stood up beside her for a moment, rapidly giving orders to the driver, urging him to speed.

Off they went, with a sudden rush into the noisy streets ; some lights were already twinkling here and there.

The hansom bowled along, swaying from side to side ; its inmates sat in utter silence. The horse seemed to Bertha to go at full gallop. That was all the better. A bewildering torpor more than ever wrapped and surrounded her. The evening air, the fatigue, and long strain of excitement, all were acting powerfully upon her. It needed her utmost efforts to keep awake, or at least to retain her senses. As for her companion,

perchance he felt that if he spoke at all, he must say too much. His momentary madness was past, doubtless. It must never return.





## CHAPTER XI.

THEY had reached the terminus. They had sprung into a compartment. They were but just in time. Already many doors were hastily shut; already final good-byes were being spoken.

“Stand back, please, stand back,” said the guard to some tearful ones who watched the train as it slowly, almost noiselessly, drifted out of the station, bearing Bertha Delachaine and her fellow-traveller.

To her it was as though she had been alone. “Aggie, Aggie,” she kept on saying in undertones. The child was like a magnet to draw her sister forward.

Dr. Jackson had paid the hansom, secured

the tickets, done everything. Bertha assuredly never noticed. She only knew that she had succeeded in bringing him. In her own mind she was merely revolving the question: could she leave Aggie to die without him? No, assuredly not. And because of this necessity, she might one day forgive him those rash kisses. Or were the kisses themselves part of that strange dream in which she was acting and moving?

As Bertha wondered vaguely—for she seemed to have lost the power to reflect—she opened her heavy eyes, and gazed around her. It was a commonplace and reassuring scene enough on which she opened them.

The train was very full. Four ladies occupied the same compartment as Bertha and Dr. Jackson. These ladies all cast furtive and commiserating glances at Bertha, who leaned back in her seat with an aspect of extreme fatigue and evident anxiety,

whilst her companion wrapped a rug around her, opened the window nearest to her, and endeavoured amidst such scanty luxury to make her as comfortable as possible. The object of their sympathy was unaware of it ; she was only glad that she might sit still, having no further need to speak or think.

It was a marvellous relief that the express train went rushing out into the twilight.

The extreme swiftness of motion, the sense of getting on as fast as possible, the cool quiet air beyond the smoke of London as it floated in from the rural landscape, from the shadowy hop-gardens and grey dusky meadows—all this was balm to Bertha's excited nerves.

Moreover, and though unknown to herself, the pleasurable familiarity of an old companionship soothed her greatly. Edward Jackson, who was not as a rule gifted with much tact or perception of other people's

feelings, had almost always in the case of Bertha shewn a singular aptitude for doing the very thing she wanted, for talking when she wished to converse, for being silent when she was fatigued, for rendering her, in fact, innumerable small services which she had never acknowledged, even when she perceived them. In truth, a strong and genuine love can often, for the time being, change our natures utterly, and make us altogether different towards the person whom we select to love than we are to the rest of the every-day world.

It seemed to Bertha's tired spirit as though but half an hour had elapsed since leaving London, when a whiff of sea air was suddenly borne in to her—then the train stopped, and there was immediate bustle and crowd.

"Please take my arm, Lady Delachaine," said the doctor's quiet voice beside her.

She obeyed him in silence, and found her-



self walking rapidly along with many other travellers through the night which was made noisy by the loud whistling of steamers, unloading and loading of luggage, voices of men, and other commotion. Next she descended a steep gangway, amidst flashing lights. A tall funnel, emitting steam and shrill sounds, was gently rocking before her ; overhead were the quiet stars ; the salt fresh air blew upon her temples.

Now she sat on the deck of the steamer, which grew every moment more crowded and darkened by shadowy figures. She would not go down into the cabin—she sat in a sheltered corner with a sailor's coat wrapped about her shoulders. The dancing lights of the quay receded quickly ; the steamer was already out at sea.

Bertha was not a good sailor, but fortunately the passage was not a rough one ; above all, there was none of that terrible

swell which proves so trying to some of those who "go down to the sea in ships" !

There was just enough of motion—jerky lively motion — to continue the sense of advance which so greatly comforted Bertha—a sense of riding over the elements, whether earth or water. The sudden splash of a wave, mounting higher than its fellows, brought a delicate mist of salt spray that, whilst it scarce wetted her face, acted like a tonic.

She was still in that strange condition when time seems to have no exact divisions. At intervals during the short voyage Dr. Jackson came and asked if she required anything.

"Nothing, thank you," she answered briefly, and he departed again.

Arrived on the French side, she availed herself once more of the help of his arm, and the two made their way quickly to a railway-

carriage. As they hastened on amongst the other travellers, Bertha was suddenly struck by what seemed to her a familiar face and figure, although she could put no name to their owner. And, whilst she was still gazing, trying to identify the man who had curiously arrested her attention, he passed on and was lost in the crowd and darkness.

Dr. Jackson had also noticed the stranger.

"Who was that man, Lady Delachaine?" he asked impetuously.

"Who? What?" asked Bertha.

"Why, that man who was staring very hard. It was exceedingly impertinent of him, I think. Do you not know him?"

"No," replied Bertha, curtly.

It really did not matter, she thought, if the man were a casual acquaintance, or not. Since her marriage she had been introduced to such a vast number of strangers!

It was with difficulty that she and her

companion found places; the train was so full. Fortunately, they succeeded in finding two window seats. Off again! Her companion deposited in Bertha's lap three or ~~four~~ dainty white paper parcels which he had purchased in the refreshment-room, telling her that it was ~~absolutely~~ necessary for her to eat something. ~~But she~~ refused; she could not eat. Perhaps had ~~she done~~ so, she might have recovered her normal state of mind; as it was, the nervous excitability of her brain did but increase.

As the hours passed, all sorts of wild thoughts and imaginings assailed her like a legion of demons. She could scarcely now realize any more whither she was going; the memory of Aggie had become a kind of spiritual vision, urging her on to a goal that she desired frantically to reach, but why or wherefore she had ceased to enquire. Even the question of the child's illness seemed to

be merged in this callous numbed state of mind and body ; she felt fatigue no more than she did anxiety. In the place of such former feelings there arose before her a curious fancy which took gradual shape and which she could not chase.

She seemed to have returned to her girlhood, to be almost living in it again. What if she had but one short year ago refused Lord Delachaine—had never entered into the life which was not greatly suited to her impetuous nature—what if she had married a younger man, who assuredly loved her with more ardent devotion than her elderly husband ever shewed, and had thus remained amongst that set of friends where she had been both happy and appreciated ?

Ah, so happy ! Like many another Elysium of the past, which we plant or build with our untrustworthy memories, that

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former girlish life of Bertha's shone suddenly out before her regretful eyes. There were no trammels then, no daily dull round of stately duties. How easy things used to be ! And how pleasant it was to find herself even for a short time with that familiar kind friend who sat facing her. For indeed she was not conscious, as many might have been in her place, that there was anything strange in such companionship. She had led a free Bohemian life of yore. It was thoroughly innocent in thought and fact ; still Miss Millings could do much which Lady Delachaine might not do. But now Bertha, in the wild reactionary wanderings of her mind, was tempted to forget awhile that she was Lady Delachaine. To some natures, these dreams of what might have been are alluring, nay irresistible at times, and yet they poison the present, and nullify the future, making the distorted past omnipotent.

As the train sped through the night, Bertha sat lulled in a fantastic trance, fixing her gaze on Edward Jackson who now at last had given way to fatigue and had fallen fast asleep, and the subtle fumes of her own imaginings, shaping their castle in the air, seemed to suffuse and intoxicate her senses more and more.

Surely, love and youthful ardour were the only things in the world worth living for—yet had she not herself, with her own careless hands, thrown these treasures away altogether? Oh, surely not altogether!

She closed her eyes and leaned back, trying to sleep like most of her companions; then, as the roar and jolting of the train seemed to enter into her thoughts and form part of them, part of that inexplicable folly that she could not shake off, some words—strange words, they were, and she could not

remember from whence they came—grew to be uttered by the confused monotony of sound about her :

“Whoever indeed resists love, like a pugilist, hand to hand is unwise. For love rules even the gods as he pleases, and myself indeed ; and why not another, such at any rate as I am ?”

Jolt, jolt, lurch, lurch, went the train—through a tunnel and out again. There was a singing in Bertha's ears. . . .

She was drinking heavy drops of that dull drug—like laudanum—that was strangely conquering her. . . .

“Whoever indeed resists love. . . .”

Edward Jackson opened his eyes slowly, and gazed at his opposite neighbour. He had been dreaming of her, but as, half awake, he saw the reality before him, his expression suddenly changed. His tell-tale face was no mystery to Bertha. Yet, the next moment,



he schooled it into its most impassive expression.

He had closed his eyes again. What eyes they were, thought his opposite neighbour. What depths of earnest power lay within them! Then he seemed to be fast asleep again. "Like a pugilist, hand to hand — whoever resists love is unwise." From whence had those words come? Bertha could not remember. They were unlike the sayings of the ordinary books she read, for she was not a great nor a learned reader. Nor did they seem to be common printed words, which any one might read or buy, but rather an inspiration, a prophecy, a solemn warning meant for herself alone. And she trembled in every limb.

Then, suddenly, there arose before her a vivid scene. She stood once more within the library at Delachaine Court; beside her was another woman, her sweet face bent

upon the husband whose heart's life she was, who in the same measure was the idol of her life; Aggie, in white soft garments, was nestling on the rug in the warm firelight. From outside the doors of this quiet sanctuary came sounds of laughter and merriment, and the swinging measure of dance music, to which Bertha's heart alone responded, beating fast, tumultuously. No one else understood. She could see before her even now the slender form of the duke, deep-seated in the old-fashioned leather chair, his worn student-like face alight with earnest thought, his delicate hand carelessly resting on a volume of Sophocles. It was all philosophy with him, naught else.

Ah, what a sudden lurch! The train rushed into a large station. "Dix minutes d'arrêt!" shouted a host of porters.

The flashing gas dazzled Bertha's heavy eyes. Everybody was roused. Some of

her fellow-travellers began to talk and laugh as they jumped down from the high railway-carriage. The scene her fancy had evoked was indeed far away !





## CHAPTER XII.

WORKING Paris was astir, although the hour was yet early when the travellers reached the end of their journey. It was daylight, and the streets were thronged with men in blouses, and women in caps, hurrying to their daily avocations ; whilst here and there a dealer in onions, or a costermonger with a barrow of cheap goods, was already plying his trade, or a stray chiffonier investigated the treasures of the gutter with his iron hook to transfer them to the *hotte* upon his back.

The sun was shining brightly ; the stately houses gleamed white and cheerful ; the usual Parisian aspect of pleasurable business

filled the very atmosphere, as Lady Delachaine and Dr. Jackson drove quickly away from the Gare du Nord.

But Bertha noticed nothing of what was around her. Whilst the dawn of day had put an end to her nocturnal fancies, chasing away the evil spirits of her imagination, (as in legendary lore the first glimmer of rosy dawn has ever been wont to exorcise such demons,) she was now only conscious of excessive weariness of mind and body both. Her fatigue was indeed so overwhelming—the mental strain being far greater than the ordinary effort of a hurried journey—that she almost wished she could lie down in the street on the white pavement, under the trees, caring no more what became of her. She had not even been roused by a trifling incident that occurred as she entered the *fiacre*.

“There’s that man again!” Dr. Jackson

had exclaimed with irritation : " Look, Lady Delachaine ! "

Bertha had bent listlessly forward, and had caught sight of a man's face leaning out from the window of a shut fiacre which—like their own—was about to drive away from the station.

Yes, she recognized him now. It was the funny man—that detestable Mr. Bond who had stayed at the Court at the time of the ball. What on earth could it matter to her whether he travelled to Paris for his pleasure or not ? She was glad that he had not accosted her. It would have been so tiresome an interruption ; she was even annoyed with her companion for pointing out the stupid fellow to her at such a time.

" Oh yes, I know him," she replied with some asperity. " Do let's get on, Dr. Jackson ! Tell the driver I will give him double fare if he goes fast to the pensionnat."

After what seemed a long and weary drive, Madame Grillon's pensionnat was finally reached. It stood in one of the empty clean-paved streets above the Champs Élysées, behind the Barrière de L'Étoile. It was a large substantial white house with green shutters, most of which were still closed, and it was shut in by a great iron gate, guarded by a high wall, and apparently only approachable through the concierge's lodge which, on this occasion, was absolutely unresponsive, though Dr. Jackson, with all his strength, pulled the bell again and again.

At last a sleepy old head, tied up in a blue cotton handkerchief, emerged slowly from a square aperture in the wall, and in a sulky voice asked what was wanted. Dr. Jackson was not a very good French scholar; for all answer, he tried imperatively to kick open the door of the lodge.

But Bertha had already alighted from the

fiacre, and began earnestly to crave admittance.

“Mais comment donc, à cette heure-çi ? On n’entre pas chez les gens comme ça, Madame !” growled the old person, whose head might have belonged as well to a man as to a woman. It turned out to be that of an old woman, however, who, leisurely pulling a string, unbolted the door suddenly, thus nearly admitting the doctor at full length.

“Ma sœur,” Bertha was repeating anxiously, “ma sœur—elle est malade—je viens voir Madame Grillon.”

She entered precipitately, but the old woman, who was in great dishabille, planted her arms akimbo, and muttered truculently :

“N’y a personne de malade. Quequ’c’t’affaire ? Attendez, attendez.”

She beckoned to a bonne who was crossing the courtyard, and in a few moments—long



to Bertha because of the breathless anxiety—the travellers were ushered into the parloir.

Madame Grillon was to come to them immediately; and, in the meanwhile, how about Aggie? What had the old concierge meant? Was it possible that the child was not so desperately ill after all? Bertha clung to the *bonne* who was leaving the room, and asked a dozen incoherent questions.

“Mais non, mais non,” said the girl gently; “tenez—si vous êtes sa sœur, je vais vous l’envoyer tout de suite.”

“Sit down,” said Dr. Jackson gravely, bringing a chair as he spoke. Bertha’s very lips were white. She could not speak—she was holding on convulsively to the table which positively shook from the trembling of her hands.

Then a light quick step came rapidly down the passage, the door burst open, and

Aggie, dishevelled and scarcely dressed, but blooming and radiant with health and pleasurable surprise, rushed into the room.

She would have rushed into her sister's arms also, but Bertha, dazed by the sudden joy that flashed startlingly upon her long suffering, as she raised her head and stretched out her arms sank suddenly back in a dead faint, and would have fallen to the ground had not Dr. Jackson caught her.

When, some time afterwards, she regained consciousness, it seemed to Bertha as though she lay—a-dreaming once more, and in utter pain of exhaustion—betwixt her good and her bad angel.

She did not immediately see Madame Grillon's dumpy little figure which, swathed in a chintz dressing-gown and surmounted by a frilled nightcap above some grey and papered curls, was biding its time in the embrasure of the window, waiting to pounce

upon miladi with an exceedingly long string of questions. She only saw Aggie, kneeling beside her, at her right hand, holding a bottle of salts and looking pale and anxious, whilst at the left stood the short stiff figure of Dr. Jackson, his fingers pressed firmly upon her wrist. She was not pleased to find her bad angel feeling her pulse. She turned from him with a sort of shudder. He was not slow to perceive her feelings. Releasing her wrist, he said coldly :

“ You are better now, Lady Delachaine ; pray do not try to sit up. You will be all right directly.”

There was a moment of silence. Bertha's eyes travelled vaguely round the room, resting on the white walls with their pious engravings, on the stiff furniture covered with crimson cotton velvet, travelling from thence to Madame's queer little figure, down to the carpet covered with large blush-roses, and

finally back to the sofa on which she herself was lying prone.

"I think—" came Dr. Jackson's quiet voice—"I think I can safely leave you now. There is nothing more that I can do for you?"

Bertha shook herself together with a strong effort.

"Are you going? Oh, don't go," she began; then after a moment she added, passing her hand 'across her forehead: "Pray don't go—I know there is something I want to say."

"I will wait then," said the young man curtly, and thereupon ensued another silence. Bertha's eyes turned towards Aggie. The child was the picture of health—what then had brought her, Bertha, to this strange pass? She raised herself on her elbow.

"Madame—Madame Grillon——" she began.

“Mais oui, Miladi,” burst forth the little schoolmistress, to whom the doctor’s stern decree of silence had proved unutterably trying during the last few minutes. “Mais, mon Dieu, Miladi——” and thereupon she rushed into a perfect torrent of ejaculation and explanation, her small fat hands rising and falling with every sentence, and the curl-papers bobbing and rustling up against her starched frilled nightcap.

Still nothing definite could be gathered or explained — Madame knew absolutely nothing of the mystery. Had Miladi really received a telegram? How very extraordinary!

Meanwhile Edward Jackson, his back turned, and his hands in his pockets, was staring at a chromolithograph of “*Les naufragés*,” a large work of art wherein a whole family were depicted, picturesquely grouped about a stone cross that appeared

to rise in mid-ocean with nothing but angry waves and stormy sky for a background. Suddenly he veered round, facing the ladies.

"What did you do with the telegram, Lady Delachaine?" he asked. "If you could produce it, it would be easier to make investigations."

"I tore it up," said Bertha nervously: "I remember quite well that I tore it up. It was on the steamer—I had nothing else to do—I could not sit still, somehow, and do nothing. I tore it up with a lot of other papers—I remember quite well the little bits going with the wind."

"That's a pity," ejaculated Jackson, vaguely.

But Bertha made no answer. She was watching Aggie's face. Surely the child knew something.

"Oh Booffles," the latter began, half

sobbing, "I don't know—I really don't know if I ought to say."

"Say? Why, of course you must say!" cried Bertha, quite sternly.

"Well then," murmured Aggie, "it was a few days ago—I was talking to Félicie—Félicie Montaigne—that's a girl in the school, you know—we were arguing about you—only I feel I oughtn't to tell."

"Yes, yes, go on," said Bertha breathlessly.

"Go on," echoed Dr. Jackson.

"Mais oui, mais oui!" cried Madame, clapping her hands with suppressed impatience.

"I told her," continued Aggie, fixing her eyes on Bertha and seeming to see her only—"I told her how dearly I loved you, and how I thought—I thought you loved me too, and how I fancied you would do anything for me, and how . . ." here Aggie

positively sobbed aloud. "It was very foolish of me, I know—but you had once said that if I were ill you would come—and . . . Oh, I suppose I must have boasted of it, but I didn't mean to! I never thought of it again, never for one moment, until now. And she said: would I really wager? And I said yes—And she said something—I forget what—as she ran out of the room—Oh Booffles, I never, never thought of it again!"

Madame Grillon's quick brown eyes had taken in the whole position of affairs. She was not a good English scholar, but Aggie's words, though broken and unconnected, were clear enough to her. Possibly, during her thirty years of tuition the small sins of girlhood had become clear to her also.

Muttering under her breath: "Ah, ce petit démon—ce petit diable," she darted from the room, almost before Bertha had



time to realize the meaning of her sister's words.

Then followed a terrible scene. The uproar and confusion were indescribable. Bertha, whenever in future she looked back upon it, could never thoroughly recall what had happened. Madame Grillon reappeared, as in a whirlwind, dragging the unfortunate Félicie by the shoulder, if not by the hair; the wretched girl—pale as death—was tremulously crying and feebly expostulating, whilst a couple of sous-maîtresses pushed her from behind, and half a dozen of the elder girls, with wide eyes and frightened faces, jostled each other at the open door.

Madame Grillon was marvellous in her lofty peroration. Aggie, standing bolt upright, was loth to desert her comrade. Madame Grillon stamped one little fat foot, then the other. To be sent to the *cachot*—to be expelled—nothing was sufficient

expiation for what had brought shame and degradation on the pensionnat Grillon, that unrivalled pensionnat known in the annals of France—nay, known to the whole world.

Félicie flung herself on the floor, abjectly embracing the obdurate knees—softly entwined in chintz—of her instructress. She had not known, she said, she had not thought.

Bertha felt hysterically inclined to laugh. The whole scene was so funny—so irresistibly comic. It was so small a result after so great an anxiety. Madame Grillon's curl-papers were getting loose. The pupils looked inexpressibly trim and tidy in their black working frocks, with different bands of colour (distinctive of classes) binding their shoulders. Across her own individuality seemed to float odd waves of faintness. The uproar rose louder—everybody seemed to

join in, till the argument grew into a shrill cry.

"This is very bad for you," said Dr. Jackson with decision. "Madame Grillon, you must take your pupils into another room ; it is necessary for Lady Delachaine to be quiet."

Bertha closed her eyes for a minute, as she thought ; then reopened them. The room had suddenly been cleared. Aggie alone stood beside her.

"He's gone, dear," the child was saying ; "I was to say good-bye for him. He said there was nothing necessary when you came to, but for you to be quite quiet."

Bertha drew a long breath. It was just as well that Edward Jackson had gone ; it was nice to be quiet, certainly. She stretched out her hand languidly, and took her little sister's rosy palm within hers, and stroked it gently. She felt a delicious peace stealing

over her ; all other feelings had faded away. How pleasant it was that she need not fight against this blissful languor ! And, unawares, overcome by fatigue of mind and body, she fell fast asleep.





## CHAPTER XIII.

MEANWHILE, Edward Jackson went out into the white sunlight, wandering down the paved street where a noisy cart, jolting on its course, was making the echoes ring, and where scarce a stray pedestrian was to be seen, for it was still early. Presently—Paris being well known to him—he made his way to the Champs Élysées, already alive and bright.

He was so famished that he actually stopped at a booth where a clean-looking old woman was arranging a pile of ginger-bread, and he bought a piece, and began to munch it as he walked along—with that curious disregard for propriety which people so often

shew when safely out of their own country and away from their own acquaintance—laughing to himself as he did so, for surely he had not eaten ginger-bread since he was ten years old.

He almost wished that he were ten years old now, as he sauntered on in the sweet spring air, which seems never sweeter, never brighter, than in the great city on the banks of the Seine. Was it not already later than he had thought? His watch had stopped, but the sun was tolerably high in the heavens, and many children and happy-looking folks were passing aimlessly in and out among the trees, or resting on the seats, whilst a goodly number of vehicles were already beginning their patient and apparently interminable navigation between the Place de la Concorde and the Arc de Triomphe.

On he went, and entered the Tuileries gardens. Whither he was going he knew

not—his brain was in a whirl—there was no particular reason why he should go anywhere. It was too late, he concluded, to catch any morning train to England. Well, it would be no hardship to linger a few hours in this green bright Paris, and start homewards at eventide. Yet it did seem to be a hardship, somehow, though home was a dreary place to think of, particularly dreary on that especial day. It is never a good thing, in fact, (he reflected) to leave one's home and daily avocations. It is unsettling—depressing, decidedly. And why had he come? For the whim of a fine lady—the useless whim—a silly senseless, wild-goose chase; nothing more nor less. What a fool he had been! So easily taken in, so readily obedient, so absurdly gullible!

He sat himself wearily down on a broad stone bench. Around him some dear little children, dressed in white, were playing with

dolls and balls, whilst two or three benignant nurses, retainers in rich or noble households, were chattering together, and smiling at their baby charges. The white dust of the broad alleys was glittering and bewildering. The fresh green leaves of the great trees were more pleasant to the eyesight. As the young man leaned back and gazed upwards, his mind seemed to lose itself in the high curtain of horse-chestnut leaves—darker and denser recesses, one upon another. Lowering his eyes, in the distance he could catch sight of a corner of the palace itself. There was a window, forlorn enough now, where perhaps formerly the empress had looked out in the zenith of her happiness and luxury, or, before that, Marie Antoinette, or in earlier times again. . . .

Edward Jackson began to meditate on the smallness of human vanity, on the passing of all things of this world. He was conscious



of a dull pain at his own heart, however, which all his philosophy could not drive away. Never mind! There was a great deal yet to be done in the world. To his ears came the rumble of carriages rolling on in the rue de Rivoli. Beyond the old deserted palace, beyond the dream of what might have been, beyond the ancient orange-trees which seemed still to hold the perfume of bygone glories, there swelled the triumphant life and stir and roar of a great city, keen, and alive, and pushing, working on, indefinitely. Towards what? Towards what must be—whether the perfectibility of human nature, or that completion of a great intent which an all-powerful Providence has planned and willed, or perchance to the mere fulfilment of man's own folly—who should say? And there, close to his feet, meanwhile arose the prattle of the tiny infants who had not yet tasted of the world, nor of pain and

sorrow and anxiety, and who, like their own little blank fresh lives, were still all clean, and fair, and innocent.

Even as he looked, the nurses arose, and seemed to gather up the babies like a fresh bunch of white soft flowers, and the little things drifted away along the sunlit alley, twittering like young birds, and leaving him alone in the cool shade under the horse-chestnut tree.

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“ Mais on ne dort pas comme ça, à midi, au beau milieu des Tuileries ! ” a sergent de ville was saying. “ Vous êtes malade, Monsieur, hein ? ”

“ Malade ? No, certainly not, ” said Dr. Jackson very curtly, as he staggered to his feet. He had assuredly been fast asleep, but that was no reason for the official in three-cornered hat and uniform to question the state of his health, nor even to interfere

with his English right of doing what he pleased when and where he liked.

Dr. Jackson stalked off in high dudgeon. He made his way to a well-known restaurant where he lunched, and after luncheon it was extraordinary how much more hopeful his views of life became.

Thereupon he lit a cigar, sauntered about the streets for a little while trying to think of everything except Bertha, and finding himself utterly unable to think of anything except Bertha. At last, there were but a couple of hours left before he could start on his homeward journey. He would have been glad to shorten the time—he was longing now to find himself back in the midst of his busy London life. It was painful to him to be so near Bertha and yet unable to see her—there was no excuse for his seeking her; she was with her sister, and it was better so.

On the whole, time would go faster and more restfully were he again to seek the green shade of the Tuileries gardens. He made his way thither, and sat down once more, though not quite in the same spot as in the morning—nor was he in the same mood.

Much thought can lengthen out a short day into great space, as though it were many days, and it seemed to Jackson a long while since he had been with Bertha, witnessing the foolish scene in the pensionnat Grillon, or had sat dreaming dreams amongst the little children, dressed in white, who played with their toys. There were no children in the secluded spot which he now chose. He sought in his pocket for a favourite book which he habitually carried there, and pulled it out, together with a heterogeneous mass of papers.

How strange and old these letters but of

yesterday seemed to him! Here was one from a fretful patient, whose rheumatism had certainly increased. One from a fellow-doctor—a great chum of his—on a difficult and puzzling case. A bill, a circular—and—why, what was this?

The perspiration broke out into cold drops on Edward Jackson's face as he gazed at the crumpled paper which he spread and flattened in his trembling hands. Was this a nightmare? Was the whole part which he had enacted to-day a phantasy, the whole scene around him a mirage, an impossibility? Was some horrible relentless fate pursuing him? *He* could not have been mistaken—*he* could not have committed this folly—*he* could not have been so utterly reckless—mad! For it was Bertha's telegram at which he was staring, staring with eyes that seemed unable to read! It was the telegram which she had given him the night before.

He tried to remember some details of the circumstances connected with the telegram. He had found her in his room alone ; he had lost his head, had spoken like an insensate fool ; yes, acted like one, for he had kissed her. In his present state of mind, he could not comprehend how he had been so wild. Then there had been five minutes—surely not more than five minutes—in which to find the time-table, to look up the train, to speak to his housekeeper, to get wine for Bertha, to leave a message or two—yes, it must have been during this hurried time that she gave him the telegram—he could not for the life of him remember the exact moment—he had meant to send it—of course he had meant to send it—but somehow after she had placed the folded paper in his hand all recollection of it had gone clean out of his mind.

Why, oh, why ! had he not instantly given it to his servant or to the cabman, or—why

had she not reminded him of it again? Why had she not alluded to it, even? Surely that was very strange? For the message was to her husband. Oh, no, no, it was altogether his own fault—his fault alone, and, as in his mind rose up a ghastly vision of all the possibilities, present and future, which might arise from that fault, and all the disaster and misconstruction which might—nay, which must—inevitably befall Bertha, his brain reeled, and the earth seemed to open and swallow him up.

For one instant only. He pulled himself together. Of course he was quite calm and alive to the misery of the situation. But oh, the irony of Fate! A short time since he had wished for an excuse to go to Bertha; now, he would gladly have given all that he possessed in the world to escape from the necessity of going to her. Ay, he must go at once, and confess to her without reserve,

not only what in his folly he had done, but what he feared might be the result. And that was so difficult! For Bertha seemed very dense on the subject—unnaturally obtuse, surely. Perhaps it was because Lord Delachaine was so devoted to her. Well, there was nothing strange in that, anyhow.

Dr. Jackson lost no time in meditation. Even whilst he pondered thus, he was walking as rapidly as he could towards the street. He hailed an open vehicle and jumped into it; then—where should he go? He supposed he should still find Bertha at the pensionnat; at any rate, the people there would know of her whereabouts. But every moment spent was a moment lost, and there was no time for delay.

The long road leading up the Champs Élysées had never seemed to him so lengthy before. Next, the paved street was intoler-



able, the delay of the old concierge irritating in the extreme. Where, where was Lady Delachaine? The concierge shook her head—she knew nothing—she never did. It was not her business to know. Nor did she view in a conciliatory spirit this young man who had already brought a great deal of unnecessary trouble and annoyance to the pensionnat, she thought, and who had not given her—the concierge—even the smallest *pourboire*!

In the present emergency however, it occurred to him that a silver coin might be an “open sesame,” and so indeed it proved, for he was quickly brought into Madame Grillon’s presence, and there, after some demur, and a great number of ejaculations which Dr. Jackson cut as short as he could, it was explained to him that Lady Delachaine and her sister were gone to the hotel Meurice, in the rue Rivoli.

So he had endured all this long drive for nothing! He sprang once more into the fiacre, and bade the coachman make the best of his way back again.





## CHAPTER XIV.

BERTHA had indeed not remained long at the pensionnat.

Having satisfied herself regarding Aggie's health, and, despite a short slumber, being intensely tired and worn out, she thought that the best thing she could do would be to remain the night at Paris. Her love for her sister was, as has been seen, the strongest motive power of her wayward nature. Her anxiety was now assuaged ; having begged and obtained from Madame Grillon a short holiday for Aggie, she sent one of the pensionnat servants to look for rooms, and soon afterwards joyfully betook herself with her sister to a comfortable apartment over-

looking the Tuileries gardens. On her way thither she stopped to send a telegram to Lord Delachaine, which she worded as follows :

“Am staying till to-morrow Hotel Meurice will write Julia well.”

Pleased with herself for this amount of consideration, Bertha gave herself up to the pleasure of the day, and, as they drove through the wide sunny thoroughfares, she began to laugh and talk with Aggie as light-heartedly as of old.

It annoyed her considerably therefore, on arriving at the door of the hotel, to find herself confronted by a lady of her acquaintance—a certain Mrs. Mackintosh—whom she disliked, and whose two daughters, dressed in the latest Paris fashions, stood by their mother on the pavement, looking up with radiant smiles as they recognized Bertha.

"Eh, but it's Lady Delachaine!" exclaimed Mrs. Mackintosh, rushing forward, stout, florid, and overwhelming. "To think of seeing ye here! Why, it's a sicht for sair een—and his lordship?"

"Lord Delachaine is in England," said Bertha stiffly, though unfortunately blushing as she spoke.

"Hech now, that's a pity!" continued the lady. "And you're staying here alone?"

"I came over to see my sister," said Bertha irritably, for she found herself unable to leave the fiacre, owing to the fussiness of her interrogator. "I hope I shall see you again, Mrs. Mackintosh," she added, as a polite hint.

"I hope so, I'm sure," was the cordial answer. "And this will be your sister? Well, she's a bonny picture. There's little the matter with her, I should say. And you're keeping well yourself, Lady Dela-

chaine ? By-the-bye, I saw a mutual friend this morning—a young man—that's Algernon Bond, you know. And he told me he'd travelled in the same train with you last night, so the news is not wholly unexpected to ye, I'm thinking."

"I know nothing of Mr. Bond. Good-bye. Pray let me pass," said Bertha, whose wrath was rising: "I am in a great hurry. Good-bye, Mrs. Mackintosh. Come along, Aggie," and she ran rather than walked into the courtyard of the hotel.

She was considerably vexed at what had occurred. She began hazily to feel that she had surrounded herself, unwittingly, by a chain of difficulties, to say nothing of a collection of annoying people. A scarce visible and cobweb-like chain it seemed; yet the more she pondered on the subject, the more convinced she grew of the existence of such a chain.

She could not discuss the matter with Aggie—that, of course, was impossible. On the other hand, she lacked all sympathy for that young person's joyous and fulsome eulogy of Dr. Jackson. She cut her little sister short more than once on this uncomfortable topic, but Aggie valiantly returned to the charge again and again, for she herself was strongly convinced that an old and trustworthy friend had been very harshly used. Why, Bertha had not even cared to thank him—not even to say good-bye! And suppose she, Aggie, had been really ill!

Bertha, after wandering round her apartment, and making some necessary arrangements, asked for paper and pen and ink, and sat down determinedly to write a letter to Lord Delachaine. But here arose before her an unexpected difficulty. To begin with, she had, as it happened, never since her marriage been absent from him, and, there-

fore, had never needed to write to him. This was certainly not the occasion of all others which she would naturally choose for her first letter to her husband.

Moreover, although yesterday all seemed clear and easy, to-day every circumstance regarding her hasty journey wore a curiously different colouring. Of course she had been distracted about Aggie, but now, here sat the child staring contentedly at the passers-by, and looking better and brighter than she had ever looked before. Had she, Bertha, been mad yesterday? No, she had only been silly—evidently silly. She pushed roughly from her mind all memory of the thoughts that had thronged it during the greater part of the night journey. Now that she had cooled down, and could view life from a totally different and more sensible standpoint, she did not wish to remind even herself of the momentary folly that had made



her think of Edward Jackson otherwise than as a most commonplace friend. No one would ever know of her insane visionary fancies—he assuredly could never have guessed them himself.

We are not always masters of our own thoughts. Bertha did not want to dwell on this disagreeable topic; she was anxious to dismiss it. But there was Mr. Bond—that detestable Mr. Bond—and Mrs. Mackintosh. Surely the latter had spoken in a very meaning tone? The great difficulty was that Aggie had never been ill at all—and then Dr. Jackson! Why on earth had he not travelled in another carriage? Bertha, as she meditated on this point, began to feel positively ungrateful to the unfortunate young man. She nibbled the top of her pen, and tried to write.

The words would not come. It seemed strange, in fact, that Lord Delachaine had

not yet telegraphed to her—rather unkind of him, on the whole. Ah no! how foolish she was! He did not know her actual address—he could not guess where she was staying. Her last telegraphic message could scarcely yet have reached him.

She looked up from her paper impatiently.

“Don’t you see,” Aggie’s chirpy voice was saying, “don’t you see, Booffles? What I feel about it is just this. It isn’t everybody who would come off like that at a moment’s notice and leave all his patients, and consulting rooms, and things.”

“My dear Aggie,” returned Bertha with plaintive irritation, “don’t *you* see that I can’t possibly get on with my letter if you chatter so incessantly?”

“Oh, I am sorry!” exclaimed Aggie, much crushed. And then the door was suddenly thrown open, and the waiter announced:

“Monsieur le docteur Jackson.”

He entered, in appearance so hurried and distraught that Bertha, who had risen angrily to her feet, stood spell-bound—intuitively aware that something terrible had happened.

She turned very pale, and so did Aggie, who, with a dash forward, came and stood close beside her, whilst the young man held out to Bertha, in fingers that were visibly trembling, a piece of crumpled paper which she did not at first recognize as her own telegram.

“I have come to ask your forgiveness,” he began in a choked strained voice that was quite unlike his own, and then he was silent—absolutely unable to utter another word.

Meanwhile, Bertha had taken the telegram, and was staring at it without comprehension.

“I don’t understand,” she said nervously.

“I didn’t send it,” quoth Dr. Jackson uncompromisingly. “I forgot it—do you

understand now? I forgot to send it. I only found it in my pocket an hour ago, and I have been to the pensionnat and back to look for you."

Bertha, as she stood facing him, her eyes dilated, grasping the situation slowly, seemed as though turned to stone, and yet Edward Jackson, as he remorsefully watched her, thought that she looked like an avenging fury. But she did not speak—her face grew more and more distorted with anger.

It seemed to him an immense time of waiting. He would have given all he possessed only to hear her utter one word of mercy. At last the silence, so exaggeratedly prolonged in his mind, was more than he could bear.

"You will believe——" he began miserably, taking a step forward.

But Bertha drew herself up—she spoke at last.

"It was unpardonable," she said in a hard whisper.

"Yes, it was unpardonable," murmured the poor young fellow, meekly. She blamed him; of course she blamed him; and, though she could not blame him one millionth part as much as he blamed himself, her anger cut him cruelly to the heart. He made no effort to defend himself. He stood before her with bowed head. At last he said:

"May I go and see Lord Delachaine?"

"Certainly not," answered Bertha with icy haughtiness. "I beg you will commit no such folly."

And then, with slow emphasis, she added cruelly:

"There is only one thing you can do for me."

Dr. Jackson looked, and read his fate in those hard eyes.

"Of course," he said under his breath.

"Please go away, and do not come back again."

He made no protest—he knew that he deserved his sentence, and he turned quickly away towards the door. But Aggie sprang forward. She had known Dr. Jackson during the greater part of her short life. To her he was a kind, tried friend—a dear friend also, second only to Bertha. She could not stand by and see him thus harshly dismissed. What if he had forgotten some telegram? Why—if it were properly addressed to Lord Delachaine, it would be easily enough explained by-and-bye. If not meant for the earl, but for some one else, it could not matter. No one else could matter. Bertha had acted heroically in coming straight off on the top of that silly Félicie's message, and it was quite as nice on the part of the young doctor. And now he was altogether misunderstood.

She bounded towards him, and seized his hand in both of hers :

“ Oh ! you came because you thought I was ill — you came for me,” she said breathlessly ; “ oh, thank you—oh, I must thank you ! You did come for me, didn’t you ? ”

This seemed to the poor fellow the last straw. He glanced hurried from the child to her sister, who stood with cold averted face—then he glanced back again at the little impassioned countenance beside him. Aggie was very like Bertha, and yet unlike—both girls were beautiful, though so different. He could not stay to argue with the younger—her affectionate frankness unmanned him. He could not lie to her, nor could he trust himself to speak.

He merely shook his head and tore away violently, shutting the door noisily behind him.

"Oh, Booffles!" exclaimed Aggie, very reproachfully, to her sister. But the latter had gone back to the writing-table, had torn in twain the paper on which she had begun a couple of stiff explanatory sentences, and now she laid her head on her folded arms, and sobbed bitterly.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next day Bertha started for England. She had never felt so out of harmony with her little sister before.

No message of any kind had come from Lord Delachaine. Late on the previous afternoon she had rewritten her letter to him and sent—barely in time to catch the post—a few stiff lines of explanation. She was uncomfortably conscious that these made up what he himself might have called a "cock-and-bull story," and she was almost as angry with herself as with Dr. Jackson at the turn which events had taken. Now that the first



telegram had miscarried, and the second one, asking no advice from her lord, had coolly announced her own intention to stay in Paris, with the fact that Aggie was in good health, it all seemed lamentably lame—there was such an uncomfortable ring of improbability about the whole matter !

Bertha felt this more and more, her shyness and her pride getting the better of her franker nature. With every passing hour any lengthy explanation in writing grew more impossible. In her letter she had merely stated to Lord Delachaine that she had been anxious about Aggie, that she and Dr. Jackson had come to Paris, that she was staying at the hotel with Aggie, that the weather was fine, and she hoped for a good passage on the morrow. It was imperatively necessary now to continue to carry matters with a high hand. But, unable to talk things over with her sister as Bertha felt

herself to be, there grew up for the first time in their lives a wall of constraint between them.

Aggie had pleaded hard to be allowed to return to England with Bertha, but the latter would not hear of it. Nay, unbeknown to the child she had sent off that very morning an additional couple of haughty telegrams, thus preparing a future plan of action which, to her headstrong temperament, seemed the only possible course. She had waited up to the last moment in anxious hope that Lord Delachaine might send some word or sign, but that was not to come. She had been, in fact, truly glad, after her fierce interview with Dr. Jackson, to stay over the night at Paris, partly in order to avoid travelling again with him, but far more because she was afraid to miss any communication from her husband.

No such communication had arrived. At

the Gare du Nord she parted, not unwillingly, with Aggie, who, now rejoined by Madame Grillon, continued tearfully to repeat :

“And so you will stay in London to-night, darling, and you will let me know to-morrow how you are, and you will write long, long, long letters, won't you ?” To all of which assertive interrogations Bertha nodded hasty acquiescence.

“Yes,” she said to herself, as presently the train bore her away from Paris and its environs, “yes, I will stay in London. But I have done no wrong, and yet John is angry with me. It is he who shall come to me ; it is he who must seek me out. If I am worth anything to him he surely cannot fail to come.”

She hugged herself because she was going back to her old home which was still unlet and unoccupied, and where she had bidden faithful Jemima join her ; she made believe

to herself that she was pleased. At any rate, under no circumstances would she trade upon the fact that she was Lady Delachaine, and had a right to the house in Belgrave Square and any of her lord's possessions. She would, as ever, maintain an independent spirit, and if he, John, chose to think ill of her—well, the consequences should be upon his own head.

She had not, however, realized how painful a programme she had prepared for herself.

It was not Bertha's habit to look forward, nor to view in any detail such rash actions as she might contemplate. Nor, for that matter, was she prone to analyze what amount of good lay in her daily life, and whose efforts helped to place it there. The world may be roughly divided into two classes of people; *i.e.* those who like to have everything done for them, and those who prefer to do every-

thing for themselves. Bertha assuredly belonged to the former class. During this last year she had been tenderly cared for, watched over, and attended to in many ways unnoticed by herself. She had grown thoroughly used to her new surroundings. Distance lends a certain amount of enchantment to every view; and, just as travellers forget the slight inconveniences and wearinesses of pleasant journeys, so had Bertha entirely put out of mind the bygone small annoyances of a so-called Bohemian life.

It seemed to her now exceedingly strange, as she stepped on the steamer and presently off again, to be jostled, rudely questioned, or left to shift for herself.

When she reached Charing Cross she was exuberantly grateful to the porter who offered to call her a cab, and quite nervously ashamed because she had no luggage—

nothing but the little handbag she carried, with scarce more than a few small coins left in her purse to reward any one active in her service.

It seemed an endless drive to her old home—it would certainly have been pleasanter to go to Belgrave Square. As she approached the familiar street, she grew positively terrified lest anything should have happened to prevent Jemima from obeying her behest. What should she do—she, Bertha Delachaine—tired and forlorn—left all alone—deserted——? She leaned anxiously forward in the cab to see if the house were put in order. Yes, one white muslin curtain, similar to that in Mrs. Weagles' house, adorned the bed-room window where the two sisters had so often sat together.

A heavy drizzling rain was falling. However, she was not long kept waiting at the

door. The familiar grenadier-like figure of Jemima appeared almost immediately after Bertha had touched the bell. Jemima's lowering brow would, in itself, have been punishment enough for most sins.

"Oh, I am so glad you are here!" cried poor Bertha, making her way into the little dining-room, the only sitting-room, in fact, prepared for her.

"Yes, my lady," was her retainer's curt answer.

"Oh, and Jemima, will you please pay the cab? Have you any money?"

"Yes, my lady."

Jemima stalked out without another word.

Bertha glanced hurriedly round the little room—no, there was no vestige of letter or telegram anywhere. She sat down, and tried to look unconcerned when Jemima came back.

"I am afraid I have only a very poor

dinner for your ladyship," began the latter severely.

"Oh, that doesn't matter in the very least—anything will do, thank you. I am so glad you got my message in time to come."

"Yes, my lady."

"And—and——"

Poor Bertha was longing to ask a question she could not put into words, yet she could not be silent. She contented herself by murmuring carelessly :

"I suppose everything's all right at the Court?"

"Which I don't know, as I came straight from home," answered Jemima, with such a full measure of severity in her accents that Bertha could not summon up courage to utter another word, but subsided helplessly in her armchair, whilst a substantial beef-steak and potatoes were placed on the table beside her.



How small the room looked! Oddly enough, she remembered it as larger—of course it had been more comfortable. Not only the evidences of daily life, but Aggie's presence also had formerly greatly brightened these narrow precincts.

She could not bear to think of Aggie now—somehow the hot tears rose in her eyes, and her throat seemed to close up to prevent her swallowing the food which she must eat, if only for the sake of the inexorable guardian who would return in another moment, and who, on this terrible evening, represented almost a gaoler. Why had she, Bertha, elected to return hither?

She could hardly explain it to herself. Like all her sudden impulses such a return had seemed the right thing, nay, the only possible thing under the circumstances. Yesterday, a dash of romance had surrounded this step of hers. To-night, of course, she

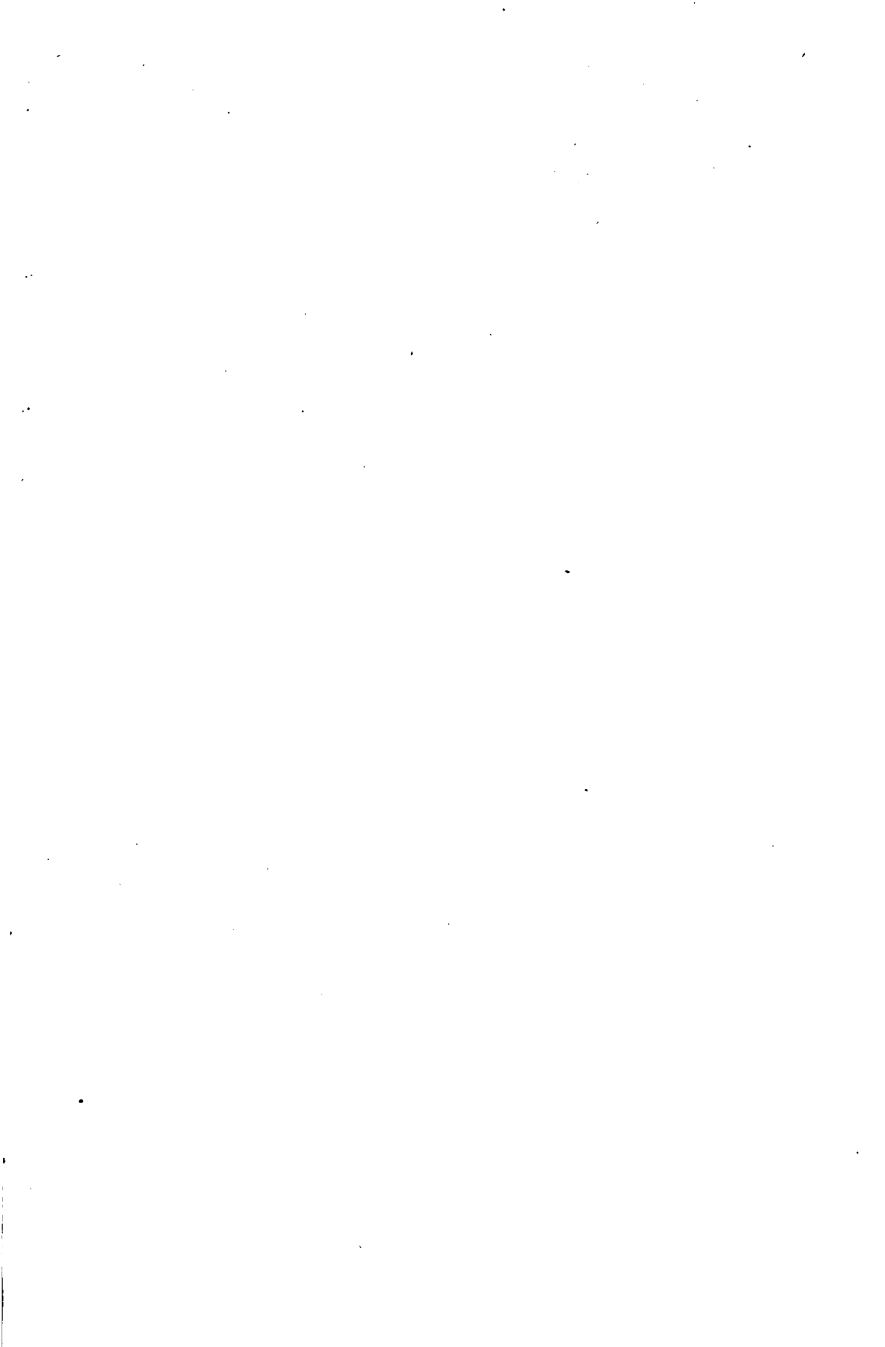
was tired. When one is tired, it is useless to attempt to reflect. So, thus arguing, and gathering her scanty possessions together, Bertha proceeded to make her way up to the familiar little bed-room which she had never expected again to inhabit.

END OF VOL. II.





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